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THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS



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TORONTO

THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

BY
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AUTHOR OF
"THE SONG OF HUGH GLASS"
"THE QUEST," ETC.

New York
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TO HILDA

Οἶον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ἐρεύθεται ἄκρῳ ἐπ' ὕσδῳ
ἄκρον ἐπ' ἀκροτάτῳ· λελάθοντο δὲ μαλοδρόπῃς,
οὐ μὰν ἐκλελαθοντ', ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐδύναντ' ἐπίκεσθαι.

NOTE

THE following narrative, though complete in itself, is designed to be the first piece in a cycle of poems dealing with the fur trade period of the Trans-Missouri region. "The Song of Hugh Glass," which was published in the fall of 1915, is the second in the series.

The four decades during which the fur trade flourished west of the Missouri River may be regarded as a typical heroic period, differing in no essential from the many other great heroic periods that have made glorious the story of the Aryan migration. Jane Harrison says that heroic characters do not arise from any peculiarity of race or even of geographical surroundings; but that, given certain social conditions, they may and do appear anywhere and at any time. The heroic spirit, as seen in heroic poetry, we are told, is the outcome of a society cut loose from its roots, of a time of migrations, of the shifting of populations. Such conditions are to be found during the time of the Spanish conquests of Central and

South America; and they are to be found also in those wonderful years of our own West, when wandering bands of trappers were exploring the rivers and the mountains and the plains and the deserts from the British possessions to Mexico, and from the Missouri to the Pacific.

As a result of our individualistic tendencies, our numerous jostling nationalities, and our materialistic temper, we Americans are prone to regard the Past as being separated from us as by an insurmountable wall. We lack the sense of racial continuity. For us it is almost as though the world began yesterday morning; and too much of our contemporary literature is based upon that view. The affairs of antiquity seem to the generality of us to be as remote as the dimmest star, and as little related to our activities. But what we call the slow lapse of ages is really only the blinking of an eye. Sometimes this sense of the close unity of all time and all human experience has come upon me so strongly that I have felt, for an intense moment, how just a little hurry on my part might get me there in time to hear Æschylus training a Chorus, or to see the wizard chisel still busy with the Parthenon frieze, or to hear Socrates telling his dreams to his judges. It is in some such mood that I ap-

proach that body of precious saga-stuff which I have called the Western American Epos; and I see it, not as a thing in itself, but rather as one phase of the whole race life from the beginning; indeed, the final link in that long chain of heroic periods stretching from the region of the Euphrates eastward into India and westward to our own Pacific Coast.

Like causes produce like effects; and as we follow the Aryan migration, we find that, over and over again, heroic periods occur; and out of each period have grown epic and saga, celebrating the deeds of the heroes. In India we find the Mahabharata and Ramayana; in Persia, the Shah Nameh; among the Greeks, the Homeric poems; in Rome, the *Æneid*; in Germany, the *Nibelungenlied*; in France, the *Chanson de Roland*; in the Scandinavian countries, the sagas and the Eddaic poems; in the British Isles, the Arthurian and Cuchulain cycles. The Race crosses the Atlantic, and the last lap of the long westward journey is begun. Still another typical heroic period develops; and where shall we find its epic? Certainly not in *Hiawatha*, which is not concerned with our race, and but little with the real American Indian, for that matter. Certainly not in *Evangeline*, which is typical neither in

matter nor manner. Nor is it likely ever to be written on a theme concerned with the original Colonies, for the reason that in the Colonies society was never cut loose from its roots. The true American Epos was developed between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean in approximately the first four decades of the 19th century. When the settlers began to cross the Missouri, the end of the epic period was in sight.

As has been the case with all similar periods, a great body of legend, concerned with heroic deeds, grew up about those men who explored that vast wilderness in search of furs. These stories, which formerly circulated throughout the West as oral tradition, are now, in the main, known only to specialists in Western history; for they are to be found chiefly in contemporary journals and books of travel long since out of print and difficult to obtain. Any one who has taken the trouble to explore that spacious and comparatively little known field of American history will be likely to believe with me that the heroes of that time were the direct descendants, in the epic line, of all the heroes of the race that have been celebrated in song and saga.

It would seem that we are now entering upon a period in which such a work as I propose might

logically be written, if we are to accept the theory of George Edward Woodberry. He tells us that those literary works which embody representative epochs appear upon what he terms "watersheds of history"; that is to say, at those times when an old order is passing away, when men look forward hopefully or fearfully to new things, and backward a little wistfully to things that have been. That is the state of the modern world. We are experiencing the wane of individualism; we are beginning to think in terms of the group; and already reactionary voices are being raised in defence of the good old days when a man could do as it pleased him to do. And if we seek for that moment in our national life when individualism was most pronounced, we shall find it in the romantic period with which I am concerned; for in that time society did not exist in the Trans-Missouri country, and there was no law but the whim of the daring and the strong.

Obviously, in attempting to embody such a period in a literary work, it is necessary to concentrate upon one representative portion of it. Fortunately, this can be done without sacrifice and without resorting to fictitious means. The story of the two expeditions that ascended the Missouri River under the leadership of Ashley

and Henry of St. Louis in the years 1822 and 1823, comprehends every phase of the life of the epoch and covers the entire Trans-Missouri region from the British boundaries to Santa Fé, and from St. Louis to the Spanish Settlements of California. Furthermore, of all the bands of trappers and traders that entered the wilderness during those years, none experienced so many extraordinary adventures as did the Ashley-Henry men. The story of their exploits and wanderings constitutes what I would call the Ashley-Henry Saga; and it is upon this that I am basing my cycle.

The first printed version of the present story is to be found in the files of a short-lived periodical known as *The Western Souvenir*, from which it was copied by the *Western Monthly Review* for July, 1829. *The Missouri Intelligencer* for September 4, 1829, and Howe's "Historical Collections of the Great West" contain practically the same version of the tale. A matter-of-fact reference to the episode is made on page 298 of the Letter Book of the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, now among the manuscripts of the Kansas Historical Society at Topeka.

I wish to express a sense of obligation to Mr. Doane Robinson, Secretary of the State His-

torical Society of South Dakota, for placing his wide knowledge of Western history at my disposal.

JOHN G. NEIHARDT.

BANCROFT, NEBRASKA,
1918.

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THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

I

ASHLEY'S HUNDRED

Who now reads clear the roster of that band?
Alas, Time scribbles with a careless hand
And often pinchbeck doings from that pen
Bite deep, where deeds and dooms of mighty men
Are blotted out beneath a sordid scrawl!

One hundred strong they flocked to Ashley's call
That spring of eighteen hundred twenty-two;
For tales of wealth, out-legending Peru,
Came wind-blown from Missouri's distant springs,
And that old sireny of unknown things
Bewitched them, and they could not linger more.
They heard the song the sea winds sang the shore
When earth was flat, and black ships dared the
steep
Where bloomed the purple perils of the deep
In dragon-haunted gardens. They were young.

2 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Albeit some might feel the winter flung
Upon their heads, 'twas less like autumn's drift
Than backward April's unregarded sift
On stout oaks thrilling with the sap again.
And some had scarce attained the height of men,
Their lips unroughed, and gleaming in their eyes
The light of immemorial surprise
That life still kept the spaciousness of old
And, like the hoarded tales their grandsires told,
Might still run bravely.

For a little span
Their life-fires flared like torches in the van
Of westward progress, ere the great wind 'woke
To snuff them. Many vanished like a smoke
The blue air drinks; and e'en of those who burned
Down to the socket, scarce a tithe returned
To share at last the ways of quiet men,
Or see the hearth-reek drifting once again
Across the roofs of old St. Louis town.

And now no more the mackinaws come down,
Their gunwales low with costly packs and bales,
A wind of wonder in their shabby sails,
Their homing oars flung rhythmic to the tide;
And nevermore the masted keelboats ride
Missouri's stubborn waters on the lone
Long zigzag journey to the Yellowstone.

Their hulks have found the harbor ways that know
The ships of all the Sagas, long ago —
A moony haven where no loud gale stirs.
The trappers and the singing *voyageurs*
Are comrades now of Jason and his crew,
Foregathered in that timeless rendezvous
Where come at last all seekers of the Fleece.

Not now of those who, dying, dropped in peace
A brimming cup of years the song shall be :
From Mississippi to the Western Sea,
From Britain's country to the Rio Grande
Their names are written deep across the land
In pass and trail and river, like a rune.

Pore long upon that roster by the moon
Of things remembered dimly. Tangled, blear
The writing runs; yet presently appear
Three names of men that, spoken, somehow seem
Incantatory trumpets of a dream
Obscurely blowing from the hinter-gloom.
Of these and that inexorable doom
That followed like a hound upon the scent,
Here runs the tale.

II

THE UP-STREAM MEN

When Major Henry went
Up river at the head of Ashley's band,
Already there were robins in the land.
Home-keeping men were following the plows
And through the smoke-thin greenery of boughs
The scattering wild-fire of the fruit bloom ran.

Behold them starting northward, if you can.
Dawn flares across the Mississippi's tide;
A tumult runs along the waterside
Where, scenting an event, St. Louis throngs.
Above the buzzing voices soar the songs
Of waiting boatmen — lilting *chansonnettes*
Whereof the meaning laughs, the music frets,
Nigh weeping that such gladness can not stay.
In turn, the herded horses snort and neigh
Like panic bugles. Up the gangplanks poured,
Go streams of trappers, rushing goods aboard
The snub-built keelboats, squat with seeming
sloth —
Baled three-point blankets, blue and scarlet
cloth,

Rum, powder, flour, guns, gauderies and lead.
And all about, goodbyes are being said.
Gauche girls with rainy April in their gaze
Cling to their beardless heroes, count the days
Between this parting and the wedding morn,
Unwitting how unhuman Fate may scorn
The youngling dream. For O how many a lad
Would see the face of Danger, and go mad
With her weird vixen beauty; aye, forget
This girl's face, yearning upward now and wet,
Half woman's with the first vague guess at woe!

And now commands are bellowed, boat horns
blow

Haughtily in the dawn; the tumult swells.
The tow-crews, shouldering the long cordelles
Slack from the mastheads, lean upon the sag.
The keelboats answer lazily and drag
Their blunt prows slowly in the gilded tide.
A steersman sings, and up the riverside
The gay contagious ditty spreads and runs
Above the shouts, the uproar of the guns,
The nickering of horses.

So, they say,
Went forth a hundred singing men that day;
And girlish April went ahead of them.
The music of her trailing garment's hem

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Seemed scarce a league ahead. A little speed
Might yet almost surprise her in the deed
Of sorcery; for, ever as they strove,
A gray-green smudge in every poplar grove
Proclaimed the recent kindling. Aye, it seemed
That bird and bush and tree had only dreamed
Of song and leaf and blossom, till they heard
The young men's feet; when tree and bush and
bird

Unleashed the whole conspiracy of awe!
Pale green was every slough about the Kaw;
About the Platte, pale green was every slough;
And still the pale green lingered at the Sioux,
So close they trailed the marching of the South.
But when they reached the Niobrara's mouth
The witchery of spring had taken flight
And, like a girl grown woman over night,
Young summer glowed.

And now the river rose,
Gigantic from a feast of northern snows,
And mightily the snub prows felt the tide;
But with the loud, sail-filling South allied,
The tow-crews battled gaily day by day;
And seldom lulled the struggle on the way
But some light jest availed to fling along
The panting lines the laughter of the strong,

For joy sleeps lightly in the hero's mood.
And when the sky-wide prairie solitude
Was darkened round them, and the camp was set
Secure for well-earned sleep that came not yet,
What stories shaped for marvel or for mirth! —
Tales fit to strain the supper-tightened girth,
Looped yarns, wherein the veteran spinners vied
To color with a lie more glorified
Some thread that had veracity enough,
Spun straightway out of life's own precious
stuff

That each had scutched and heckled in the raw.
Then thinner grew each subsequent guffaw
While drowsily the story went the rounds
And o'er the velvet dark the summer sounds
Prevailed in weird crescendo more and more,
Until the story-teller with a snore
Gave over to a dream a tale half told.

And now the horse-guards, while the night grows
old,
With intermittent singing buffet sleep
That surges subtly down the starry deep
On waves of odor from the manless miles
Of summer-haunted prairie. Now, at whiles,
The kiote's mordant clamor cleaves the drowse.
The horses stamp and blow; about the prow

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Dark waters chug and gurgle; as with looms
Bugs weave a drone; a beaver's diving booms,
Whereat bluffs grumble in their sable cowl.
The devil laughter of the prairie owls
Mocks mirth anon, like unrepentant sin.
Perceptibly at last slow hours wear thin
The east, until the prairie stares with morn,
And horses nicker to the boatman's horn
That blares the music of a day begun.

So through the days of thunder and of sun
They pressed to northward. Now the river
shrank,
The grass turned yellow and the men were lank
And gnarled with labor. Smooth-lipped lads
matured
'Twixt moon and moon with all that they
endured,
Their faces leathered by the wind and glare,
Their eyes grown ageless with the calm far
stare
Of men who know the prairies or the seas.
And when they reached the village of the
Rees,
One scarce might say, This man is young, this
old,
Save for the beard.

Here loitered days of gold
And days of leisure, welcome to the crews ;
For recently had come the wondrous news
Of beaver-haunts beyond the Great Divide —
So rich a tale 'twould seem the tellers lied,
Had they not much fine peltry to attest.
So now the far off River of the West
Became the goal of venture for the band ;
And since the farther trail lay overland
From where the Great Falls thundered to no
ear,

They paused awhile to buy more ponies here
With powder, liquor, gauds and wily words.
A horse-fond people, opulent in herds,
The Rees were ; and the trade was very good.

Now camped along the river-fringing wood,
Three sullen, thunder-brewing, rainless days,
Those weathered men made merry in their
ways

With tippie, euchre, story, jest and song.
The marksmen matched their cleverness ; the
strong

Wrestled the strong ; and brawling pugilists
Displayed the boasted power of their fists
In stubborn yet half amicable fights.
And whisky went hell-roaring through the nights

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Among the lodges of the fuddled Rees.
Thus merrily the trappers took their ease,
Rejoicing in the thread that Clotho spun;
For it was good to feel the bright thread run,
However eager for the snipping shears.

O joy long stifled in the ruck of years!
How many came to strange and bitter ends!
And who was merrier than those three friends
Whom here a song remembers for their woe?

Will Carpenter, Mike Fink and Frank Talbeau
Were they — each gotten of a doughty breed;
For in the blood of them the ancient seed
Of Saxon, Celt and Norman grew again.
The Mississippi reared no finer men,
And rarely the Ohio knew their peers
For pluck and prowess — even in those years
When stern life yielded suck but to the strong.
Nor in the hundred Henry took along
Was found their match — and each man knew it
well.

For instance, when it suited Mike to tell
A tale that called for laughter, as he thought,
The hearer laughed right heartily, or fought
And took a drubbing. Then, if more complained,
Those three lacked not for logic that explained

The situation in no doubtful way.

"Me jokes are always funny" Mike would say;
And most men freely granted that they were.

A lanky, rangy man was Carpenter,
Quite six feet two from naked heel to crown;
And, though crow-lean, he brought the steelyard
down

With twice a hundred notched upon the bar.

Nor was he stooped, as tall men often are;

A cedar of a man, he towered straight.

One might have judged him lumbering of gait,

When he was still; but when he walked or ran,

He stepped it lightly like a little man —

And such a one is very good to see.

Not his the tongue for quip or repartee;

His wit seemed slow; and something of the child

Came o'er his rough-hewn features, when he
smiled,

To mock the porching brow and eagle nose.

'Twas when he fought the true import of those

Grew clear, though even then his mien deceived;

For less in wrath, he seemed, than mildly
grieved —

Which made his blows no whit less true or hard.

His hair was flax fresh gleaming from the card;

His eyes, the flax in bloom.

A match in might,
 Fink lacked five inches of his comrade's height,
 And of his weight scarce twenty pounds, they
 say.

His hair was black, his small eyes greenish gray
 And restless as though feeling out of place
 In such a jocund plenilunar face
 That seemed made just for laughter. Then one
 saw

The pert pugnacious nose, the forward jaw,
 The breadth of stubborn cheekbones, and one
 knew

That jest and fight to him were scarcely two,
 But rather shifting phases of the joy
 He felt in living. Careless as a boy,
 Free handed with a gift or with a blow,
 And giving either unto friend or foe
 With frank good will, no man disliked him long.
 They say his voice could glorify a song,
 However loutish might the burden be;
 And all the way from Pittsburg to the sea
 The Rabelaisian stories of the rogue
 Ran wedded to the richness of his brogue.
 And wheresoever boatmen came to drink,
 There someone broached some escapade of Fink
 That well might fill the goat-hoofed with delight;
 For Mike, the pantagruelizing wight,

Was happy in the health of bone and brawn
And had the code and conscience of the faun
To guide him blithely down the easy way.
A questionable hero, one might say :
And so indeed, by any civil law.
Moreover, at first glimpse of him one saw
A bull-necked fellow, seeming over stout ;
Tremendous at a heavy lift, no doubt,
But wanting action. By the very span
Of chest and shoulders, one misjudged the man
When he was clothed. But when he stripped to
swim,
Men flocked about to have a look at him,
Moved vaguely by that body's wonder-scheme
Wherein the shape of God's Adamic dream
Was victor over stubborn dust again!

O very lovely is a maiden, when
The old creative thrill is set astir
Along her blood, and all the flesh of her
Is shapen as to music! Fair indeed
A tall horse, lean of flank, clean-limbed for
speed,
Deep-chested for endurance! Very fair
A soaring tree, aloof in violet air
Upon a hill! And 'tis a glorious thing
To see a bankfull river in the spring

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Fight homeward! Children wonderful to see —
The Girl, the Horse, the River and the Tree —
As any suckled at the breast of sod;
Dissolving symbols leading back to God
Through vista after vista of the Plan!
But surely none is fairer than a man
In whom the lines of might and grace are one.

Bronzed with exposure to the wind and sun,
Behold the splendid creature that was Fink!
You see him strolling to the river's brink,
All ease, and yet tremendously alive.
He pauses, poised on tiptoe for the dive,
And momentarily it seems the mother mud,
Quick with a mystic seed whose sap is blood,
Mysteriously rears a human flower.
Clean as a windless flame the lines of power
Run rhythmic up the stout limbs, muscle-
laced,
Athwart the ropy gauntness of the waist,
The huge round girth of chest, wherever spread
Enormous shoulders. Now above his head
He lifts his arms where big thews merge and
flow
As in some dream of Michelangelo;
And up along the dimpling back there run,
Like lazy serpents stirring in the sun,

Slow waves that break and pile upon the slope
Of that great neck in swelling rolls, a-grope
Beneath the velvet softness of the skin.
Now suddenly the lean waist grows more thin,
The deep chest on a sudden grows more deep ;
And with the swiftness of a tiger's leap,
The easy grace of hawks in swooping flight,
That terrible economy of might
And beauty plunges outward from the brink.

Thus God had made experiment with Fink,
As proving how 'twere best that men might
grow.

One turned from Mike to look upon Talbeau —
A little man, scarce five feet six and slim —
And wondered what his comrades saw in him
To justify their being thus allied.
Was it a sort of planetary pride
In lunar adoration? Hark to Mike :
“Shure I declare I niver saw his like —
A skinny whiffet of a man! And yit —
Well, do ye moind the plisint way we mit
And how he interjooiced hisself that day?
'Twas up at Pittsburg, liquor flowin' fray
And ivrybody happy as a fool.
I cracked me joke and thin, as is me rule,

Looked round to view the havoc of me wit;
 And ivrywan was doubled up wid it,
 Save only wan, and him a scrubby mite.
 Says I, and shure me language was polite,
 'And did ye hear me little joke?' says I.
 'I did' says he. 'And can't ye laugh, me
 b'y?'

'I can't' says he, the sassy little chap.
 Nor did I git me hand back from the slap
 I give him till he landed on me glim,
 And I was countin' siventeen of him
 And ivry dancin' wan of him was air!
 Faith, whin I hit him he was niver there;
 And shure it seemed that ivry wind that blew
 Was peltin' knuckles in me face. Hurroo!
 That toime, fer wance, I got me fill of fun!
 God bless the little whiffet! It begun
 Along about the shank of afthernoon;
 And whin I washed me face, I saw the moon
 A-shakin' wid its laughther in the shtrame.
 And whin, betoimes, he wakened from his
 drame,

I says to him, 'Ye needn't laugh, me b'y:
 A cliver little man ye are,' says I.
 And Och, the face of me! I'm tellin' fac's —
 Ye'd wonder did he do it wid an ax!
 'Twas foine! 'Twas art!"

Thus, eloquent with pride,
Mike Fink, an expert witness, testified '
To Talbeau's fistic prowess.

Now they say
There lived no better boatmen in their day
Than those three comrades; and the larger
twain
In that wide land three mighty rivers drain
Found not their peers for skill in marksmanship.
Writes one, who made the long Ohio trip
With those boon cronies in their palmy days,
How once Mike Fink beheld a sow at graze
Upon the bank amid her squealing brood;
And how Mike, being in a merry mood,
Shot off each wiggling piglet's corkscrew tail
At twenty yards, while under easy sail
The boat moved on. And Carpenter could bore
A squirrel's eye clean at thirty steps and more —
So many say. But 'twas their dual test
Of mutual love and skill they liked the best
Of all their shooting tricks — when one stood up
At sixty paces with a whisky cup
Set brimming for a target on his head,
And felt the gusty passing of the lead,
Hot from the other's rifle, lift his hair.
And ever was the tin cup smitten fair

By each, to prove the faith of each anew:
 For 'twas a rite of love between the two,
 And not a mere capricious feat of skill.

"Och, shure, and can ye shoot the whisky, Bill?"
 So Mike would end a wrangle. "Damn it,
 Fink!

Let's bore a pair of cups and have a drink!"
 So Carpenter would stop a row grown stale.
 And neither feared that either love might fail
 Or either skill might falter.

Thus appear

The doughty three who held each other dear
 For qualities they best could comprehend.

Now came the days of leisure to an end —
 The days so gaily squandered, that would
 seem

To men at length made laughterless, a dream
 Unthinkably remote; for Ilion held
 Beneath her sixfold cerement of Eld
 Seems not so hoar as bygone joy we prize
 In evil days. Now vaguely pale the skies,
 The glimmer neither starlight's nor the morn's.
 A rude ironic merriment of horns
 Startles the men yet heavy with carouse,
 And sets a Ree dog mourning in the drowse,

Snout skyward from a lodge top. Sleepy birds
Chirp in the brush. A drone of sullen words
Awakes and runs increasing through the camp.
Thin smoke plumes, rising in the valley damp,
Flatten among the leathern tents and make
The whole encampment like a ghostly lake
Where bobbing heads of swimmers come and go,
As with the whimsy of an undertow

That sucks and spews them. Raising dust and
din,

The horse-guards drive their shaggy rabble in
From nightlong grazing. *Voyageurs*, with packs
Of folded tents and camp gear on their backs,
Slouch boatward through the reek. But when
prevails

The smell of frying pans and coffee pails,
They cease to sulk and, greatly heartened,
sing

Till ponies swell the chorus, nickering,
And race-old comrades jubilate as one.

Out of a roseless dawn the heat-pale sun
Beheld them toiling northward once again —
A hundred horses and a hundred men
Hushed in a windless swelter. Day on day
The same white dawn o'ertook them on their
way;

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And daylong in the white glare sang no bird,
But only shrill grasshoppers clicked and whirred,
As though the heat were vocal. All the while
The dwindling current lengthened, mile on
mile,
Meandrous in a labyrinth of sand.

Now e'er they left the Ree town by the Grand
The revellers had seen the spent moon roam
The morning, like a tipsy hag bound home.
A bubble-laden boat, they saw it sail
The sunset river of a fairy tale
When they were camped beside the Cannon-
ball.

A spectral sun, it held the dusk in thrall
Nightlong about the Heart. The stars alone
Upon the cluttered Mandan lodges shone
The night they slept below the Knife. And
when

Their course, long westward, shifted once again
To lead them north, the August moon was new.

The rainless Southwest wakened now and blew
A wilting, worrying, breath-sucking gale
That roared one moment in the bellied sail,
Next moment slackened to a lazy croon.
Now came the first misfortune. All forenoon

With line and pole the sweating boatmen strove
Along the east bank, while the horseguards
drove

The drooping herd a little to the fore.
And then the current took the other shore.
Straight on, a maze of bar and shallow lay,
The main stream running half a mile away
To westward of a long low willow isle.
An hour they fought that stubborn half a mile
Of tumbled water. Down the running planks
The polesmen toiled in endless slanting ranks.
Now swimming, now a-flounder in the ooze
Of some blind bar, the naked cordelle crews
Sought any kind of footing for a pull;
While gust-bedevised sails, now booming full,
Now flapping slack, gave questionable aid.

The west bank gained, along a ragged shade
Of straggling cottonwoods the boatmen sprawled
And panted. Out across the heat-enthralled,
Wind-fretted waste of shoal and bar they saw
The string of ponies ravelled up a draw
That mounted steeply eastward from the vale
Where, like a rampart flung across the trail,
A bluff rose sheer. Heads low, yet loath to
graze,
They waxed and withered in the oily haze,

22 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Now ponies, now a crawling flock of sheep.
Behind them three slack horseguards, half
asleep,
Swayed limply, leaning on their saddle-bows.

The boat crews, lolling in a semi-doze,
Still watch the herd; nor do the gazers dream
What drama nears a climax over stream,
What others yonder may be watching too.
Now looming large upon the lucent blue,
The foremost ponies top the rim, and stare
High-headed down the vacancies of air
Beneath them; while the herders dawdle still
And gather wool scarce halfway up the hill —
A slumbrous sight beheld by heavy eyes.

But hark! What murmuring of far-flung cries
From yonder pocket in the folded rise
That flanks the draw? The herders also hear
And with a start glance upward to the rear.
Their spurred mounts plunge! What do they
see but dust

Whipped skyward yonder in a freakish gust?
What panic overtakes them? Look again!
The rolling dust cloud vomits mounted men,
A ruck of tossing heads and gaudy gears
Beneath a bristling thicket of lean spears
Slant in a gust of onset!

Over stream

The boatmen stare dumfounded. Like a dream
In some vague region out of space and time
Evolves the swiftly moving pantomime
Before those loungers with ungirded loins;
Till one among them shouts "*Assiniboines!*"
And swelling to a roar, the wild word runs
Above a pellmell scramble for the guns,
Perceived as futile soon. Yet here and there
A few young hotheads fusillade the air,
And rage the more to know the deed absurd.
Some only grind their teeth without a word;
Some stand aghast, some grinningly inane,
While some, like watch-dogs rabid at the chain,
Growl curses, pacing at the river's rim.

So might unhappy spirits haunt the dim
Far shore of Styx, beholding outrage done
To loved ones in the region of the sun —
Rage goaded by its own futility!

For one vast moment strayed from time, they see
The war band flung obliquely down the slope,
The flying herdsmen, seemingly a-grope
In sudden darkness for their saddle guns.
A murmuring shock! And now the whole scene
runs

Into a dusty blur of horse and man;
 And now the herd's rear surges on the van
 That takes the cue of panic fear and flies
 Stampeding to the margin of the skies,
 Till all have vanished in the deeps of air.
 Now outlined sharply on the sky-rim there
 The victors pause and taunt their helpless
 foes

With buttocks patted and with thumbs at nose
 And jeers scarce hearkened for the wind's guffaw.
 They also vanish. In the sunwashed draw
 Remains no sign of what has come to pass,
 Save three dark splotches on the yellow grass,
 Where now the drowsy horseguards have their
 will.

At sundown on the summit of the hill
 The huddled boatmen saw the burial squad
 Tuck close their comrades' coverlet of sod —
 Weird silhouettes on melancholy gray.
 And very few found anything to say
 That night; though some spoke gently of the
 dead,
 Remembering what that one did or said
 At such and such a time. And some, more
 stirred
 With lust of vengeance for the stolen herd,

Swore vaguely now and then beneath their breath.
Some, brooding on the imminence of death,
Grew wistful of their unreturning years;
And some who found their praying in arrears
Made shift to liquidate the debt that night.

But when once more the cheerful morning light
Came on them toiling, also came the mood
Of young adventure, and the solitude
Sang with them. For 'tis glorious to spend
One's golden days large-handed to the end —
The good broadpieces that can buy so much!
And what may hoarders purchase but a crutch
Wherewith to hobble graveward?

On they pressed
To where once more the river led them west;
And every day the hot wind, puff on puff,
Assailed them; every night they heard it sough
In thickets prematurely turning sere.

Then came the sudden breaking of the year.

Abruptly in a waning afternoon
The hot wind ceased, as fallen in a swoon
With its own heat. For hours the swinking
crews
Had bandied scarcely credible good news

26 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Of clouds across the dim northwestward plain;
And they who offered wagers on the rain
Found ready takers, though the gloomy rack,
With intermittent rumbling at its back,
Had mounted slowly. Now it towered high,
A blue-black wall of night across the sky
Shot through with glacial green.

A mystic change!

The sun was hooded and the world went
strange —

A picture world! The hollow hush that fell
Made loud the creaking of the taut cordelle,
The bent spar's groan, the plunk of steering
poles.

A bodeful calm lay glassy on the shoals;
The current had the look of flowing oil.
They saw the cloud's lip billow now and boil —
Black breakers gnawing at a coast of light;
They saw the stealthy wraith-arms of the night
Grove for the day to strangle it; they saw
The up-stream reaches vanish in a flaw
Of driving sand: and scarcely were the craft
Made fast to clumps of willow fore and aft,
When with a roar the blinding fury rolled
Upon them; and the breath of it was cold.
There fell no rain.

That night was calm and clear :
Just such a night as when the waning year
Has set aflare the old Missouri wood ;
When Greenings are beginning to be good ;
And when, so hollow is the frosty hush,
One hears the ripe persimmons falling — *plush!* —
Upon the littered leaves. The kindly time !
With cider in the vigor of its prime,
Just strong enough to edge the dullest wit
Should neighbor folk drop in awhile to sit
And gossip. O the dear flame-painted gloam,
The backlog's sputter on the hearth at home —
How far away that night ! Thus many a
lad,
Grown strangely old, remembered and was sad.
Wolves mourned among the bluffs. Like hanks
of wool
Fog flecked the river. And the moon was full.

A week sufficed to end the trail. They came
To where the lesser river gives its name
And meed of waters to the greater stream.
Here, lacking horses, they must nurse the
dream
Of beaver haunts beyond the Great Divide,
Build quarters for the winter trade, and bide
The coming up of Ashley and his band.

28 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

So up and down the wooded tongue of land
That thins to where the rivers wed, awoke
The sound of many axes, stroke on stroke;
And lustily the hewers sang at whiles —
The better to forget the homeward miles
In this, the homing time. And when the geese
With cacophonic councils broke the peace
Of frosty nights before they took to wing;
When cranes went over daily, southering,
And blackbirds chattered in the painted wood,
A mile above the river junction stood
The fort, adjoining the Missouri's tide.
Foursquare and thirty paces on a side,
A wall of sharpened pickets bristled round
A group of sod-roofed cabins. Bastions frowned
From two opposing corners, set to brave
A foe on either flank; and stout gates gave
Upon the stream, where now already came
The Indian craft, lured thither by the fame
Of traders building by the mating floods.

III

TO THE MUSSELSHELL

Now came at dawn a party of the Bloods,
Who told of having paddled seven nights
To parley for their people with the Whites,
The long way lying 'twixt a foe and foe ;
For ever on their right hand lurked the Crow,
And on their left hand, the Assiniboine.
The crane-winged news, that where the waters
join

The Long Knives built a village, made them sad ;
Because the pastures thereabouts were bad,
Sustaining few and very scrawny herds.
So they had hastened hither, bringing words
Of kindness from their mighty men, to tell
What welcome waited on the Musselshell
Where stood the winter lodges of their band.

They rhapsodized the fatness of that land :
Lush valleys where all summer bison ran
To grass grown higher than a mounted man !
Aye, winter long on many a favored slope
The bison grazed with goat and antelope,

30 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Nor were they ever leaner in the spring !
One heard the diving beaver's thundering
In all the streams at night ; and one might hear
Uncounted bull elks whistle, when the year
Was painted for its death. Their squaws were
good,
Strong bearers of the water and the wood,
With quiet tongues and never weary hands ;
Tall as the fighting men of other lands,
And good to look upon. These things were so !
Why else then should Assiniboine and Crow
Assail the Bloods ?

Now flaring up, they spoke
Of battles and their haters blown as smoke
Before the blizzard of their people's ire,
Devoured as grass before a prairie fire
That licks the heavens when the Northwind
runs !

But, none the less, their warriors needed guns
And powder. Wherefor, let the Great White
Chief

Return with them, ere yet the painted leaf
Had fallen. If so be he might not leave
This land of peoples skillful to deceive,
Who, needing much, had scarce a hide to sell —
Then send a party to the Musselshell

To trade and trap until the grass was young
And calves were yellow. With no forkéd tongue
The Bloods had spoken. Had the White Chief
ears?

So Major Henry called for volunteers;
And Fink was ready on the word to go
“And chance the bloody naygurs”; then Tal-
beau,
Then Carpenter; and after these were nine,
In whom young blood was like a beading wine,
Who lusted for the venture.

Late that night

The Bloods set out for home. With day's first
light
The dozen trappers followed, paddling west
In six canoes. And whatso suited best
The whimsies of the savage or his needs,
The slim craft carried — scarlet cloth and beads,
Some antiquated muskets, powder, ball,
Traps, knives, and little casks of alcohol
To lubricate the rusty wheels of trade!

So, singing as they went, the blithe brigade
Departed, with their galloping canoes
Heeding the tune. They had no time to lose;

32 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

For long and stubborn was the upstream way,
And when they launched their boats at break of
day

They heard a thin ice tinkle at the prows.

A bodeful silence and a golden drowse
Possessed the land. The Four Winds held their
breath

Before a vast serenity of death,
Wherein it seemed the reminiscent Year —
A yearning ghost now — wrought about its bier
Some pale hallucination of its May.

Bleak stretched the prairie to the walls of day,
So dry, that where a loping kiote broke
Its loneliness, it smouldered into smoke:
And when a herd of bison rumbled past,
'Twas like a great fire booming in a blast,
The rolling smudge whereof concealed the flame.

Proceeding in the truce of winds, they came
In five days to the vale the Poplar drains.
A trailing flight of southbound whooping cranes,
Across the fading West, was like a scrawl
Of cabalistic warning on a wall,
And counselled haste. In seven days they
reached
The point where Wolf Creek empties in, and
beached

Their keels along its dusty bed. In nine,
Elk Prairie and the Little Porcupine,
Now waterless, had fallen to the rear.
The tenth sun failed them on the lone frontier
Where flows the turbid Milk by countless bends
And where Assiniboian country ends
And Blackfoot Land begins. The hollow gloom
All night resounded with the beaver's boom;
A wolf pack yammered from a distant hill;
Anon a rutting elk cried, like a shrill
Arpeggio blown upon a flageolet.
A half day more their lifting prows were set
To westward; then the flowing trail led south
Two days by many a bend to Hell Creek's mouth
Amid the Badlands. Gazing from a height,
The lookout saw the marching of the Night
Across a vast black waste of peaks and deeps
That could have been infernal cinder-heaps,
The relics of an ancient hell gone cold.

That night they saw a wild aurora rolled
Above the lifeless wilderness. It formed
Northeastwardly in upright waves that stormed
To westward, sequent combers of the bow
That gulfed Polaris in their undertow
And hurtled high upon the Ursine Isles
A surf of ghostly fire. Again, at whiles,

A shimmering silken veil, it puffed and swirled
 As 'twere the painted curtain of the world
 That fluttered in a rising gale of doom.
 And when it vanished in the starry gloom
 One said "'Twill blow to-morrow."

So it did.

Ere noon they raised the Half Way Pyramid
 Southwestward; saw its wraith-like summit
 lift

And seem to float northwest against a drift
 Of wind-whipped dust. The lunar hills about —
 Where late a bird's note startled like a shout
 The hush that seemed the body of old Time —
 Now bellowed where the hoofs of Yotunheim
 Foreran the grizzled legions of the Snow.
 'Twas peep of day when it began to blow,
 A zephyr growing stronger with the light,
 And now by fits it churned the river white
 And whipped the *voyageurs* with freezing spray.
 The windward reaches took their breath away.
 Ghost-white and numb with cold, from bend to
 bend,

Where transiently the wind became a friend
 To drive them south, they battled; till at
 last

Around a jutting bluff they met a blast

That choked as with a hand upon their throats
The song they sang for courage; hurled their
boats

Against the farther shore and held them pinned.

A sting of spitting snow was in the wind.
Southwest by west across the waste, where fell
A murky twilight, lay the Musselshell —
Two days of travel with the crow for guide.
Here must they find them shelter, and abide
The passing of the blizzard as they could.
The banks bore neither plum nor cottonwood
And all the hills were naked as a hand.
But where, debouching from the broken land,
A river in the spring was wont to flow,
A northward moving herd of buffalo
Had crossed the river, evidently bound
From failing pastures to the grazing ground
Along the Milk: and where the herd had
passed

Was scattered *bois de vache* enough to last
Until the storm abated. So they packed
Great blanketfuls of sun-dried chips, and stacked
The precious fuel where the wind was stilled —
A pocket hemmed by lofty bluffs and filled
With mingled dusk and thunder; bore therein
Canoes and cargo, pitched their tents of skin

36 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

About a central heap of glowing chips,
And dined on brittle bull-meat dried in strips,
With rum to wash it down.

It snowed all night.
The earth and heavens, in the morning light,
Were one white fury; and the stream ran slush.
Two days and nights the gale boomed; then a
hush
Fell with the sun; and when the next dawn
came —
A pale flare flanked by mockeries of flame —
The river lay as solid as the land.

Now caching half their goods, the little band
Resumed the journey, toiling under packs;
And twice they felt the morning at their backs,
A laggard traveller; and twice they saw
The sunset dwindle to a starry awe
Beyond the frozen vast, while still they pressed
The journey — bearded faces yearning west,
White as the waste they trod. Then one day
more,
Southwestward, brought them to the jutting shore
That faced the goal.

A strip of poplars stretched
Along a winding stream, their bare boughs etched

Black line by line upon a flat of snow
Blue tinted in the failing afterglow.
Humped ponies 'mid the drifts and clumps of sage
Went nosing after grudging pasturage
Where'er it chanced the blizzard's whimsic flaws
Had swept the slough grass bare. A flock of
squaws

Chopped wood and chattered in the underbrush,
Their ax strokes thudding dully in the hush,
Their nasal voices rising shrill and clear :
And, circled 'neath a bluff that towered sheer
Beside the stream, snug lodges wrought of hide,
Smoke-plumed and glowing with the fires inside,
Made glad the gazers. Even as they stood,
Content to stare a moment, from the wood
The clamor deepened, and a running shout
Among the lodges brought the dwellers out,
Braves, squaws, papooses; and the wolf dogs
bayed ;
And up the flat the startled ponies neighed,
Pricking their ears to question what befell.

So came Fink's party to the Musselshell,
Gaunt, bearded, yet — how gloriously young
And then, what feasts of bison fleece and tongue,
Of browned *boudin* and steaming humprib stew !
What roaring nights of wassailing they knew —

38 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Gargantuan regales — when through the town
The fiery liquor ravined, melting down
The tribal hoard of beaver! How they made
Their merest gewgaws mighty in the trade!
Aye, merry men they were! Nor could they
know

How even then there came that wraith of woe
Amongst them; some swift-fingered Fate that
span

The stuff of sorrow, wove 'twixt man and man
The tangling mesh, that friend might ruin friend
And each go stumbling to a bitter end —
A threefold doom that now the Song recalls.

IV

THE NET IS CAST

There was a woman.

What enchantment falls
Upon that far off revel ! How the din
Of jangling voices, chaffering to win
The lesser values, hushes at the words,
As dies the dissonance of brawling birds
Upon a calm before the storm is hurled !
Lo, down the age-long reaches of the world
What rose-breatht wind of ghostly music creeps !

And was she fair — this woman ? Legend keeps
No answer ; yet we know that she was young,
If truly comes the tale by many a tongue
That one of Red Hair's party fathered her.
What need to know her features as they were ?
Was she not lovely as her lover's thought,
And beautiful as that wild love she wrought
Was fatal ? Vessel of the world's desire,
Did she not glow with that mysterious fire
That lights the hearth or burns the roof-tree down ?
What face was hers who made the timeless town

A baleful torch forever? Hers who wailed
 Upon the altar when the four winds failed
 At Aulis? What the image that looked up
 On Iseult from the contemplated cup
 Of everlasting thirst? What wondrous face
 Above the countless cradles of the race
 Makes sudden heaven for the blinking eyes?
 One face in truth! And once in Paradise
 Each man shall stray unwittingly, and see —
 In some unearthly valley where the Tree
 With golden fruitage perilously fraught
 Still stands — that image of God's afterthought.
 Then shall the world turn wonderful and strange!

Who knows how came that miracle of change
 To Fink at last? For he was not of such
 As tend to prize one woman overmuch;
 And legend has it that, from Pittsburg down
 To Baton Rouge, in many a river town
 Some blowsy Ariadne pined for Mike.
 "It is me rule to love 'em all alike."
 He often said, with slow, omniscient wink,
 When just the proper quantity of drink
 Had made him philosophic; "Glass or gourd,
 Shure, now, they're all wan liquor whin they're
 poured!
 Aye, rum is rum, me b'y!"

Alas, the tongue!

How glibly are its easy guesses flung
Against the knowing reticence of years,
To echo laughter in the time of tears,
Raw gusts of mocking merriment that stings!
Some logic in the seeming ruck of things
Inscrutably confutes us!

Now had come

The time when rum no longer should be rum,
But witchwine sweet with peril. It befell
In this wise, insofar as tongue may tell
And tongues repeat the little eyes may guess
Of what may happen in that wilderness,
The human heart. There dwelt a mighty man
Among the Bloods, a leader of his clan,
Around whose life were centered many lives,
For many sons had he of many wives;
And also he was rich in pony herds.
Wherefore, they say, men searched his lightest
words
For hidden things, since anyone might see
That none had stronger medicine than he
To shape aright the stubborn stuff of life.
Among the women that he had to wife
Was she who knew the white man when the band
Of Red Hair made such marvel in the land,

She being younger then and little wise.
 But in that she was pleasing to the eyes
 And kept her fingers busy for her child
 And bore a silent tongue, the great man smiled
 Upon the woman, called her to his fire
 And gave the Long Knife's girl a foster sire,
 So that her maidenhood was never lean,
 But like a pasture that is ever green
 Because it feels a mountain's sunny flank.

Now in the season when the pale sun shrank
 Far southward, like another kind of moon,
 And dawns were laggard and the dark came soon,
 It pleased the great man's whim to give a feast.
 'Twas five days after Carpenter went east
 With eight stout ponies and a band of three
 To lift the cache; a fact that well might be
 Sly father to the great man's festive mood —
 A wistfully prospective gratitude,
 Anticipating charity!

It chanced

That while the women sang and young men
 danced
 About the drummers, and the pipe went round,
 And ever 'twixt the songs arose the sound
 Of fat dog stewing, Fink, with mournful eyes
 And pious mien, lamented the demise

Of "pore owld Fido," till his comrades choked
With stifled laughter; soberly invoked
The plopping stew ("Down, Rover! Down, me
lad!");

Discussed the many wives the old man had
In language more expressive than polite.
So, last of all his merry nights, that night
Fink clown'd it, little dreaming he was doomed
To wear that mask of sorrow he assumed
In comic mood, thenceforward to the last.
For even as he joked, the net was cast
About him, and the mystic change had come,
And he had looked on rum that was not rum —
The Long Knife's daughter!

Stooped beneath a pack
Of bundled twigs, she pushed the lodge-flap
back

And entered lightly; placed her load of wood
Beside the fire; then straightened up and stood
One moment there, a shapely girl and tall.
There wasn't any drama: that was all.
But when she left, the wit had died in Fink.
He seemed a man who takes the one more drink
That spoils the fun, relaxes jaw and jowl
And makes the jester, like a sunstruck owl,
Stare solemnly at nothing.

44 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

All next day

He moped about with scarce a word to say,
 And no one dared investigate his whim.
 But when the twilight came, there fell on him
 A sentimental, reminiscent mood,
 As though upon some frozen solitude
 Within him, breathed a softening chinook,
 Far strayed across the alplike years that look
 On what one used to be and what one is.
 And when he raised that mellow voice of his
 In songs of lovers wedded to regret,
 'Tis said that, unashamed, men's eyes grew
 wet,
 So poignantly old memories were stirred.
 And much his comrades marvelled as they
 heard
 That ribald jester singing thus of love.
 Nor could they solve the mystery thereof,
 Until at dawn they saw him rise and take
 A rifle of the latest Hawkin make,
 Ball, powder, and a bolt of scarlet goods,
 And hasten to the fringe of cottonwoods
 Where rose the great man's lodge smoke. Then
 they knew;
 For thus with gifts the Bloods were wont to
 woo
 The daughter through the sire.

The white sun burned
Midmost the morning steep when he returned
Without his load and humming as he went.
And hour by hour he squatted in his tent
And stared upon the fire; save now and then
He stirred himself to lift the flap again
And cast an anxious gaze across the snows
Where stood the chieftain's lodge. And well did
those

Who saw him know what sight he hoped to see;
For 'twas the custom that the bride-to-be
Should carry food to him she chose to wed.
Meanwhile, with seemly caution, be it said,
Fink's men enjoyed a comedy, and laid
Sly wagers on the coming of the maid —
She would! She wouldn't! So the brief day
waned.

Now when the sun, a frosty specter maned
With corruscating vapors, lingered low
And shadows lay like steel upon the snow,
An old squaw, picking faggots in the brush,
Saw that which set her shrieking in the hush.
"They come! They come!" Then someone
shouted "Crows!"
The town spewed tumult, men with guns and
bows,

Half clad and roaring; shrill hysteric wives
With sticks of smoking firewood, axes, knives;
Dogs, bristle-necked and snarling. So they
pressed

To meet a foe, as from a stricken nest
The hornet swarm boils over.

Blinking, dazed
With sudden light and panic fear, they gazed
About the frozen waste; and then they saw
Eight laden ponies filing up the draw,
Their nostrils steaming, slack of neck and slow.
Behind them, stumbling in the broken snow,
Three weary trappers trudged, while in the
lead

Strode Carpenter. A goodly sight, indeed !
Upstanding, eagle-faced and eagle-eyed,
The ease of latent power in his stride,
He dwarfed the panting pony that he led ;
And when the level sunlight 'round his head
Made glories in the frosted beard and hair,
Some Gothic fighting god seemed walking there,
Strayed from the dim Hercynian woods of old.

How little of a story can be told!
Let him who knows what happens in the seed
Before the sprout breaks sunward, make the deed

A plummet for the dreaming deeps that surged
Beneath the surface ere the deed emerged
For neat appraisal by the rule of thumb !
The best of Clio is forever dumb,
To human ears at least. Nor shall the Song
Presume to guess and tell how all night long,
While roared the drunken orgy and the trade,
Doom quickened in the fancy of a maid,
The daughter of the Long Knife ; how she saw,
Serenely moving through a spacious awe
Behind shut lids where never came the brawl,
That shining one, magnificently tall,
A day-crowned mortal brother of the sun.
Suffice it here that, when the night was done
And morning, like an uproar in the east,
Aroused the town still heavy with the feast,
All men might see what whimsic, fatal bloom
A soil, dream-plowed and seeded in the gloom,
Had nourished unto blowing in the day.

'Twas then the girl appeared and took her way
Across the snow with hesitating feet.
She bore a little pot of steaming meat ;
And when midmost the open space, she turned
And held it up to where the morning burned,
As one who begs a blessing of the skies.
Unconscious of the many peeping eyes,

48 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Erect, with wrapt uplifted face she stood —
 A miracle of shapely maidenhood —
 Before the flaming god. And many heard,
 Or seemed to hear by piecing word to word,
 The prayer she muttered to the wintry sky:
 "O Sun, behold a maiden! Pure am I!
 Look kindly on the little gift I give;
 For, save you smile upon it, what can live?
 Bright Father, hear a maiden!" Then, as one
 Who finds new courage for a task begun,
 She turned and hastened to the deed.

They say

There was no dearth of gossiping that day
 Among the lodges. Shrewish tongues there were
 That clacked no happy prophecies of her.
 And many wondered at the chieftain's whim.
 The Long Knife's girl had wrought a spell on
 him;
 Why else then was he silent? See her shrink
 A moment there before the tent of Fink,
 As one who feels a sudden sleety blast!
 But look again! She starts, and hurries past!
 All round the circled village, lodges yawn
 To see how brazen in the stare of dawn
 A petted girl may be. For now, behold!
 Was ever maiden of the Bloods so bold?

She stops before another tent and stoops,
Her fingers feeling for the buckskin loops
That bind the rawhide flap. 'Tis opened wide.
The slant white light of morning falls inside,
And half the town may witness at whose feet
She sets the little pot of steaming meat —
'Tis Carpenter!

V

THE QUARREL

Perceptibly, at length,
The days grew longer, and the winter's strength
Increased to fury. Down across the flat
The blizzards bellowed; and the people sat
Fur-robed about the smoky fires that stung
Their eyes to streaming, when a freak gust flung
The sharp reek back with flaws of powdered snow.
And much the old men talked of long ago,
Invoking ghostly Winters from the Past,
Till cold snap after cold snap followed fast,
And none might pile his verbal snow so deep
But some athletic memory could heap
The drifts a trifle higher; give the cold
A greater rigor in the story told;
Put bellows to a wind already high.
And ever greater reverence thereby
The old men won from gaping youths, who heard,
Like marginalia to the living word,
The howling of the poplars tempest-bent,
The smoke-flap cracking sharply at the vent,

The lodge poles creaking eerily. And O!
The happy chance of living long ago,
Of having wrinkles now and being sires
With many tales to tell around the fires
Of days when things were bigger! All night
long

White hands came plucking at the buckskin thong
That bound the door-flap, and the writhing dark
Was shrill with spirits. By the snuffling bark
Of dogs men knew that homesick ghosts were
there.

And often in a whirl of chilling air
The weird ones entered, though the flap still held,
Built up in smoke the shapes they knew of eld,
Grew thin and long to vanish as they came.

Now had the scandal, like a sudden flame
Fed fat with grasses, perished in the storm.
The fundamental need of keeping warm
Sufficed the keenest gossip for a theme;
And whimsies faded like a warrior's dream
When early in the dawn the foemen cry.

The time when calves are black had blustered
by —

A weary season — since the village saw
The chief's wife pitching for her son-in-law

The nuptial lodge she fashioned. Like a bow
That feels the arrow's head, the moon hung
low

That evening when they gave the wedding
gifts;

And men had seen it glaring through the rifts
Of wintry war as up the east it reeled,
A giant warrior's battle-bitten shield —
But now it braved no more the charging air.
Meanwhile the lodge of Carpenter stood there
Beside the chieftain's, huddled in the snows,
And, like a story everybody knows,
Was little heeded now.

But there was one
Who seldom noted what was said or done
Among his comrades; he would sit and look
Upon the fire, as one who reads a book
Of woeful doings, ever on the brink
Of ultimate disaster. It was Fink:
And seeing this, Talbeau was sick at heart
With dreading that his friends might drift apart
And he be lost, because he loved them both.
But, knowing well Mike's temper, he was loath
To broach the matter. Also, knowing well
That silence broods upon the hottest hell,
He prayed that Fink might curse.

So worried past
The days of that estrangement. Then at last
One night when round their tent the blizzard
roared

And, nestled in their robes, the others snored,
Talbeau could bear the strain no more and spoke.
He opened with a random little joke,
Like some starved hunter trying out the range
Of precious game where all the land is strange;
And, as the hunter, missing, hears the grim
And spiteful echo-rifles mocking him,
His own unmirthful laughter mocked Talbeau.
He could have touched across the ember-glow
Mike's brooding face — yet Mike was far away.
And O that nothing more than distance lay
Between them — any distance with an end!
How tireless then in running to his friend
A man might be! For suddenly he knew
That Mike would have him choose between the
two.

How could he choose 'twixt Carpenter and Fink?
How idle were a choice 'twixt food and drink
When, choosing neither, one were sooner dead!

Thus torn within, and hoarse with tears unshed,
He strove again to find his comrade's heart:
"O damn it, Mike, don't make us drift apart!

54 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Don't do it, Mike! This ain't a killin' fuss,
 And hadn't ought to faze the three of us
 That's weathered many a rough-and-tumble fight!
 W'y don't you mind that hell-a-poppin' night
 At Baton Rouge three years ago last fall —
 The time we fit the whole damned dancin' hall
 And waded out nigh belly-deep in men?
 O who'd have said a girl could part us, then?
 And, Mike, that fracas in the Vide Poche dive!
 Can you forget it long as you're alive? —
 A merry time! Us strollin' arm-in-arm
 From drink to drink, not calculatin' harm,
 But curious, because St. Louis town
 Fair boiled with greasy mountain men, come
 down

All brag and beaver, howlin' for a spree!
 And then — you mind? — a feller jostled me —
 'Twas at the bar — a chap all bones and big.
 Says he in French: 'You eater of a pig,
 Make room for mountain men!' And then says
 you

In Irish, aimin' where the whiskers grew,
 And landin' fair: 'You eater of a dog,
 Make room for boatmen!' Like a punky log
 That's water-soaked, he dropped. What hap-
 pened then?

A cyclone in a woods of mountain men —

That's what! O Mike, you can't forget it
now!

And what in hell's a woman, anyhow,
To memories like that?"

So spoke Talbeau,
And, pausing, heard the hissing of the snow,
The snoring of the sleepers, and the cries
Of blizzard-beaten poplars. Still Fink's eyes
Upon the crumbling embers pored intent.
Then momentarily, or so it seemed, there went
Across that alien gaze a softer light,
As when bleak windows in a moony night
Flush briefly with a candle borne along.
And suddenly the weary hope grew strong
In him who saw the glimmer, and he said:
"O Mike, I see the good old times ain't dead!
Why don't you fellers shoot the whisky cup
The way you used to do?"

Then Fink looked up.
'Twas bad the way the muscles twitched and
worked
About his mouth, and in his eyes there lurked
Some crouchant thing. "To hell wid you!" he
cried.
So love and hate that night slept side by side;

56 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

And hate slept well, but love lay broad awake
And, like a woman, for the other's sake
Eked out the lonely hours with worrying.

Now came a heartsick yearning for the spring
Upon Talbeau; for surely this bad dream
Would vanish with the ice upon the stream,
Old times be resurrected with the grass!
But would the winter ever, ever pass,
The howling of the blizzard ever cease?
So often now he dreamed of hearing geese
Remotely honking in the rain-washed blue;
And ever when the blur of dawn broke through
The scudding rack, he raised the flap to see,
By sighting through a certain forkèd tree,
How much the sun made northward.

Then, one day,
The curtain of the storm began to fray;
The poplars' howling softened to a croon;
The sun set clear, and dusk revealed the moon —
A thin-blown bubble in a crystal bowl.
All night, as 'twere the frozen prairie's soul
That voiced a hopeless longing for the spring,
The wolves assailed with mournful question-
ing
The starry deeps of that tremendous hush.

Dawn wore the mask of May — a rosy flush.
It seemed the magic of a single bird
Might prove the seeing of the eye absurd
And make the heaped-up winter billow green.
On second thought, one knew the air was keen —
A whetted edge in gauze. The village fires
Serenely builded tenuous gray spires
That vanished in the still blue deeps of awe.
All prophets were agreed upon a thaw.
And when the morning stood a spearlength high,
There grew along the western rim of sky
A bank of cloud that had a rainy look.
It mounted slowly. Then the warm chinook
Began to breathe a melancholy drowse
And sob among the naked poplar boughs,
As though the prairie dreamed a dream of June
And knew it for a dream. All afternoon
The gale increased. The sun went down blood-
red;
The young moon, perilously fragile, fled
To early setting. And the long night roared.

Tempestuously broke the day and poured
An intermittent glory through the rifts
Amid the driven fog. The sodden drifts
Already grooved and withered in the blast;
And when the flying noon stared down aghast,

58 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

The bluffs behind the village boomed with
flood.

What magic in that sound to stir the blood
Of winter-weary men! For now the spring
No longer seemed a visionary thing,
But that which any morning might bestow.
And most of all that magic moved Talbeau;
For, scrutinizing Fink, he thought he saw
Some reflex of that February thaw —
A whit less curling of the upper lip.
O could it be returning comradeship,
That April not beholden to the moon
Nor chattered to the sun?

That afternoon
They played at euchre. Even Fink sat in;
And though he showed no eagerness to win,
Forgot the trumps and played his bowers wild,
There were not lacking moments when he smiled,
A hesitating smile 'twixt wan and grim.
It seemed his stubborn mood embarrassed him
Because regret now troubled it with shame.

The great wind died at midnight. Morning
came,
Serene and almost indolently warm —
As when an early April thunder storm

Has cleansed the night and vanished with the
gloom;

When one can feel the imminence of bloom
As 'twere a spirit in the orchard trees;
When, credulous of blossom, come the bees
To grumble 'round the seepages of sap.
So mused Talbeau while, pushing back the flap,
Instinctively he listened for a bird
To fill the hush. Then presently he heard —
And 'twas the only sound in all the world —
The trickle of the melting snow that purled
And tinkled in the bluffs above the town.
The sight of ragged Winter patched with brown,
The golden peace and, palpitant therein,
That water note, spun silverly and thin,
Begot a wild conviction in the man:
The wounded Winter weakened; now began
The reconciliation! Hate would go
And, even as the water from the snow,
Old comradeship come laughing back again!

All morning long he pondered, while the men
Played seven-up. And scarce a trick was
played

But someone sang a snatch of song or made
A merry jest. And when the game was balked
By one who quite forgot his hand, and talked

60 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Of things in old St. Louis, none demurred.
And thus, by noon, it seemed the lightest word
Of careless salutation would avail
To give a happy ending to the tale
Of clouded friendship. So he 'rose and went,
By studied indirection, to the tent
Of Carpenter, as one who takes the air.
And, as he raised the flap and entered there,
A sudden gale of laughter from the men
Blew after him. What music in it then!
What mockery, when memory should raise
So often in the coming nights and days
The ruthless echo of it!

Click on click

Amid the whirlwind finish of a trick
The cards fell fast, while King and Queen and Ace,
With meaner trumps for hounds, pursued the chase
Of wily Knave and lurking Deuce and Ten;
When suddenly the game-enchanted men
Were conscious of a shadow in the place,
And glancing up they saw the smiling face
Of Carpenter, thrust in above Talbeau's.
"How goes it, Boys?" said he; and gaily those
Returned the greeting. "Howdy, Mike!" he
said;
And with a sullen hanging of the head

Fink mumbled "Howdy!" Gruff — but what
of that?

One can not doff displeasure like a hat —
'Twould dwindle snow-like.

Nothing else would do
But Carpenter should play. Now Fink played
too;

And, having brought his cherished ones together,
Talbeau surrendered to the languid weather
And, dreamily contented, watched the sport.
All afternoon the pictured royal court
Pursued its quarry in the mimic hunt;
And Carpenter, now gayer than his wont,
Lost much; while Fink, with scarce a word to say,
His whole attention fixed upon the play,
Won often. So it happened, when the sun
Was near to setting, that the day seemed won
For friendliness, however stood the game.
But even then that Unseen Player came
Who stacks the shuffled deck of circumstance
And, playing wild the Joker men call Chance,
Defeats the Aces of our certainty.

The cards were dealt and Carpenter bid three.
The next man passed the bid, and so the next.
Then Fink, a trifle hesitant and vexed,

Bid four on spades. And there was one who said
 In laughing banter : "Mike, I'll bet my head
 As how them spades of your'n 'll dig a hole!"
 And in some subtle meaning of the soul
 The wag was more a prophet than he knew.

Fink held the Ace and Deuce, and that made two :
 His black King scored another point with
 Knave.

But Carpenter, to whom that Weird One gave
 A band of lesser trumps to guard his Ten,
 Lay low until the Queen had passed, and then
 Swept in a last fat trick for Game, and scored.
 And now the players slapped their knees and
 roared :

"You're set! You're in the hole! He set you,
 Mike!"

Then suddenly they saw Fink crouch to strike;
 And ere they comprehended what they saw,
 There came a thud of knuckles on a jaw
 And Carpenter rolled over on the ground.
 One moment in a breathless lapse of sound
 The stricken man strove groggily to 'rise,
 The emptiness of wonder in his eyes
 Turned dreamily with seeming unconcern
 Upon Mike's face, where now began to burn

The livid murder-lust. 'Twixt breath and breath
The hush and immobility of death
Made there a timeless picture. Then a yell,
As of a wild beast charging, broke the spell.
Fink sprang to crush, but midway met Talbeau
Who threw him as a collie dog may throw
A raging bull. But Mike was up again,
And wielding thrice the might of common men,
He gripped the little man by nape and thigh
And lightly lifted him and swung him high
And flung him; and the smitten tent went down.
Then 'rose a roar that roused the teeming town,
And presently a shouting rabble surged
About the wreck, whence tumblingly emerged
A knot of men who grappled Fink and clung.
Prodigiously he rose beneath them, flung
His smashing arms, man-laden, forth and back;
But stubbornly they gripped him, like a pack
That takes uncowed the maulings of a bear.
"Let Carpenter get up!" they cried. "Fight
fair!
Fight fair! Fight fair!"

Quite leisurely the while
The stricken man arose, a sleepy smile
About his quiet eyes. Indeed, he seemed
As one but lately wakened, who has dreamed

64 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

A pleasing dream. But when he stroked his
beard

And gazed upon his fingers, warmly smeared
With crimson from the trickle at his jaw,
His eyes went eagle-keen with what they saw.
The stupor passed. He hastily untied
His buckskin shirt and, casting it aside,
Stood naked to the hips. The tumult ceased
As, panting hard, the *voyageurs* released
Their struggling charge and, ducking to a swing
Of those freed arms, sought safety, scamper-
ing.

Fink also stripped his shirt; and as the man
Stood thus revealed, a buzz of wonder ran
Amid the jostling rabble. Few there were
Who in that moment envied Carpenter,
Serenely poised and waiting placid browed :
For shall a lonely cedar brave a cloud
Bulged big and shapen to the cyclone's whirl?
Lo, even as the body of a girl,
The body of the blond was smooth and white;
But vaguely, as one guesses at the night
Of silent waters running swift and deep,
One guessed what stores of power lay asleep
Beneath the long fleet lines of trunk and limb.
Thus God had made experiment with him;

And, groping for the old Adamic dream,
Had found his patterns in the tree and stream,
As Fink's in whirling air and hungry flame.

Now momentarily the picture there became
A blur of speed. Mike rushed. The tiptoe town
Craned eagerly to see a man go down
Before that human thunder gust. But lo!
As bends a sapling when the great winds blow,
The other squatted, deftly swayed aside,
And over him the slashing blows went wide.
Fink sprawled. But hardly had a spreading
 roar

O'errun the town, when silence as before
Possessed the scene; for Mike flashed back again
With flame-like speed, and suddenly the men
Clenched, leaning neck to neck.

Without a word,
Like horn-locked bulls that strive before the herd,
They balanced might with might; till Mike's
 hands whipped
Beneath the other's arm-pits, met and gripped
Across the broad white shoulders. Then began
The whole prodigious engine of the man
To bulge and roll and darken with the strain.
Like rivulets fed suddenly with rain,

66 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

The tall one's thews rose ropily and flowed
Converging might against the growing load
Of those tremendous arms that strove to crush.

Their labored breathing whistled in the hush.
One saw the blond man's face go bluish red,
As deeper, deeper sank Fink's shaggy head
Amid his heaped-up shoulder brawn. One knew
That very soon the taller of the two
Must yield and take that terrible embrace.

A tense hypnotic quiet filled the place.
The men were like two wrestlers in a dream
That holds an endless moment; till a scream
Fell stab-like on the hush. One saw Talbeau,
Jaws set, hands clenched, eyes wild, and bending
low,
As though he too were struggling, slowly bowed
Beneath Fink's might. And then —

What ailed the crowd?
Swept over by a flurry of surprise,
They swayed and jostled, shouting battle-cries
And quips and jeers of savage merriment.
One moment they had seen the tall man bent,
About to break: then, falling back a-haunch,
His feet had plunged against the other's paunch
And sent Fink somersaulting.

Once again

A silence fell as, leaping up, the men
Were mingled briefly in a storm of blows.
Now, tripping like a dancer on his toes,
The blond man sparred ; while, like a baited bear,
Half blinded with the lust to crush and tear,
Fink strove to clutch that something lithe and
sleek

That stung and fled and stung. Upon his cheek
A flying shadow laid a vivid bruise ;
Another — and his brow began to ooze
Slow drops that splattered on his bearded jaw.
Again that shadow passed — his mouth went raw,
And like a gunshot wound it gaped and bled.

Fink roared with rage and plunged with lowered
head

Upon this thing that tortured, hurled it back
Amid the crowd. One heard a thud and smack
Of rapid blows on bone and flesh — and then
One saw the tall man stagger clear again
With gushing nostrils and a bloody grin,
And down his front the whiteness of the skin
Was striped with flowing crimson to the waist.
Unsteadily he wheeled about and faced
The headlong hate of his antagonist.
Now toe to toe and fist to flying fist,

68 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

They played at give and take; and all the while
The blond man smiled that riddle of a smile,
As one who meditates upon a jest.

Yet surely he was losing! Backward pressed,
He strove in vain to check his raging foe.
Fink lunged and straightened to a shoulder
blow
With force enough to knock a bison down.
The other dodged it, squatting. Then the
town
Discovered what a smile might signify.
For, even as the futile blow went by,
One saw the lithe white form shoot up close in,
A hooked white arm jab upward to the chin —
Once — twice — and yet again. With eyes a-
stare,
His hands aloft and clutching at the air,
Fink tottered backward, limply lurched and fell.

Then came to pass what stilled the rabble's
yell,
So strange it was. And 'round the fires that
night
The wisest warriors, talking of the fight,
Could not explain what happened at the end.
No friend, they said, makes war upon a friend;

Nor does a foe have pity on a foe :
And yet the tall white chief had bathed with
 snow
The bloody mouth and battered cheek and brow
Of him who fell !

 Queer people, anyhow,
The Long Knives were — and hard to under-
 stand !

VI

THE SHOOTING OF THE CUP

Bull-roaring March had swept across the land,
And now the evangelic goose and crane,
Forerunners of the messianic Rain,
Went crying through the wilderness aloft.
Fog hid the sun, and yet the snow grew soft.
The monochrome of sky and poplar bough,
Drab tracery on drab, was stippled now
With swelling buds; and slushy water ran
Upon the ice-bound river that began
To stir and groan as one about to wake.

Now, while they waited for the ice to break,
The trappers fashioned bull-boats — willow
wrought
To bowl-like frames, and over these drawn taut
Green bison hides with bison sinew sewn.
And much they talked about the Yellowstone:
How fared their comrades yonder since the fall?
And would they marvel at the goodly haul
Of beaver pelts these crazy craft should bring?
And what of Ashley starting north that spring

With yet another hundred? Did his prow
Already nose the flood? — Ah, cherry boughs
About St. Louis now were loud with bees
And white with bloom; and wading to the knees,
The cattle browsed along the fresh green sloughs!
Yes, even now the leaning cordelle crews
With word from home (so far away, alas!)
Led north the marching armies of the grass,
As 'twere the heart of Summertime they towed!

So while they shaped the willow frames and sewed
The bison hides, the trappers' hearts were light.
They talked no longer now about the fight.
That story, shaped and fitted part by part,
Unwittingly was rounded into art,
And, being art, already it was old.
When this bleak time should seem the age of gold,
These men, grown gray and garrulous, might tell
Of wondrous doings on the Musselshell —
How Carpenter, the mighty, fought, and how
Great Fink went down. But spring was coming
now,
And who's for backward looking in the spring?

Yet one might see that Mike still felt the sting
Of that defeat; for often he would brood,
Himself the center of a solitude

Wherein the friendly chatter of the band
 Was like a wind that makes a lonely land
 Seem lonelier. And much it grieved Talbeau
 To see a haughty comrade humbled so;
 And, even more, he feared what wounded pride
 Might bring to pass, before their boats could
 ride

The dawnward reaches of the April floods
 And leave behind the village of the Bloods;
 For now it seemed a curse was on the place.
 Talbeau was like a man who views a race
 With all to lose: so slowly crept the spring,
 So surely crawled some formless fatal thing,
 He knew not what it was. But should it win,
 Life could not be again as it had been
 And spring would scarcely matter any more.
 The daybreak often found him at the shore,
 A ghostly figure in the muggy light,
 Intent to see what progress over night
 The shackled river made against the chain.

And then at last, one night, a dream of rain
 Came vividly upon him. How it poured!
 A witch's garden was the murk that roared
 With bursting purple bloom. 'Twas April
 weather,
 And he and Mike and Bill were boys together

Beneath the sounding shingle roof at home.
He smelled the odor of the drinking loam
Still rolling mellow from the recent share;
And he could feel the meadow greening there
Beyond the apple orchard. Then he 'woke
And raised the flap. A wraith of thunder-smoke
Was trailing off along the prairie's rim.
Half dreaming yet, the landscape puzzled him.
What made the orchard seem so tall and lean?
And surely yonder meadow had been green
A moment since! What made it tawny now?
And yonder where the billows of the plow
Should glisten fat and sleek —?

The drowsy spell

Dropped off and left him on the Musselshell
Beneath the old familiar load of care.
He looked aloft. The stars had faded there.
The sky was cloudless. No, one lonely fleece
Serenely floated in the spacious peace
And from the distance caught prophetic light.
In truth he had heard thunder in the night
And dashing rain; for all the land was soaked,
And where the withered drifts had lingered,
smoked
The naked soil. But since the storm was gone,
How strange that still low thunder mumbled on —

74 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

An unresolving cadence marred at whiles
By dull explosions! Now for miles and miles
Along the vale he saw a trail of steam
That marked the many windings of the stream,
As though the river simmered. Then he knew.
It was the sound of April breaking through!
The resurrection thunder had begun!
The ice was going out, and spring had won
The creeping race with dread!

His ringing cheers
Brought out the blinking village by the ears
To share the news; and though they could not
know

What ecstasy of triumph moved Talbeau,
Yet lodge on lodge took up the joyous cry
That set the dogs intoning to the sky,
The drenched cayuses shrilly nickering.
So man and beast proclaimed the risen Spring
Upon the Musselshell.

And all day long
The warring River sang its ocean song.
And all that night the spirits of the rain
Made battle music with a shattered chain
And raged upon the foe. And did one gaze
Upon that struggle through the starry haze,

One saw enormous bodies heaved and tossed,
Where stubbornly the Yotuns of the Frost
With shoulder set to shoulder strove to stem
The wild invasion rolling over them.
Nor in the morning was the struggle done.
Serenely all that day the doughty Sun,
A banished king returning to his right,
Beheld his legions pouring to the fight,
Exhaustless; and his cavalries that rode —
With hoofs that rumbled and with manes that
 flowed
White in the war gust — crashing on the foe.
And all that night the din of overthrow
Arose to heaven from the stricken field;
A sound as of the shock of spear and shield,
Of wheels that trundled and the feet of hordes,
Of shrieking horses mad among the swords,
Hurrahing of attackers and attacked,
And sounds as of a city that is sacked
When lust for loot runs roaring through the night.
Dawn looked upon no battle, but a flight.
And when the next day broke, the spring flood
 flowed
Like some great host that takes the homeward
 road
With many spoils — a glad triumphal march,
Of which the turquoise heaven was the arch.

Now comes a morning when the tents are down
 And packed for travel; and the whole Blood town
 Is out along the waterfront to see
 The trappers going. Dancing as with glee,
 Six laden bull-boats feel the April tide
 And sweep away. Along the riverside
 The straggling, shouting rabble keeps abreast
 A little while; but, longer than the rest,
 A weeping runner races with the swirl
 And loses slowly. 'Tis the Long Knife's girl,
 Whom love perhaps already makes aware
 How flows unseen a greater river there —
 The never-to-be-overtaken days.
 And now she pauses at the bend to gaze
 Upon the black boats dwindling down the long
 Dawn-gilded reach. A merry trapper's song
 Comes liltingly to mock her, and a hand
 Waves back farewell. Now 'round a point of land
 The bull-boats disappear; and that is all —
 Save only that long waiting for the fall
 When he would come again.

All day they swirled

Northeastwardly. The undulating world
 Flowed by them — wooded headland, greening
 vale
 And naked hill — as in a fairy tale

Remembered in a dream. And when the flare
Of sunset died behind them, and the air
Went weird and deepened to a purple gloom,
They saw the white Enchanted Castles loom
Above them, slowly pass and drift a-rear,
Dissolving in the starry crystal sphere
'Mid which they seemed suspended.

Late to camp,

They launched while yet the crawling valley damp
Made islands of the distant hills and hid
The moaning flood. The Half Way Pyramid
That noon stared in upon them from the south.
'Twas starlight when they camped at Hell Creek's
mouth,

Among those hills where evermore in vain
The Spring comes wooing, and the April rain
Is tears upon a tomb. And once again
The dead land echoed to the songs of men
Bound dayward when the dawn was but a streak.
Halfway to noon they sighted Big Dry Creek,
Not choked with grave dust now, but carolling
The universal music of the spring.
Then when the day was midway down the sky,
They reached the Milk. And howsoe'er the
eye

Might sweep that valley with a far-flung gaze,
It found no spot uncovered with a maze

78 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Of bison moving lazily at browse —
Scarce wilder than a herd of dairy cows
That know their herdsman.

Now the whole band willed
To tarry. So they beached their boats and killed
Three fatling heifers; sliced the juicy rumps
For broiling over embers; set the humps
And loins to roast on willow spits, and threw
The hearts and livers in a pot to stew
Against the time of dulling appetites.
And when the stream ran opalescent lights
And in a scarlet glow the new moon set,
The feast began. And some were eating yet,
And some again in intervals of sleep,
When upside down above the polar steep
The Dipper hung. And many tales were told
And there was hearty laughter as of old,
With Fink's guffaw to swell it now and then.
It seemed old times were coming back again;
That truly they had launched upon a trip
Whereof the shining goal was comradeship:
And tears were in the laughter of Talbeau,
So glad was he. For how may mortals know
Their gladness, save they sense it by the fear
That whispers how the very thing held dear
May pass away?

The smoky dawn was lit,
And, suddenly become aware of it,
A flock of blue cranes, dozing on the sand,
With startled cries awoke the sprawling band
And took the misty air with moaning wings.
Disgruntled with the chill drab scheme of things,
Still half asleep and heavy with the feast,
The trappers launched their boats. But when
the east
Burned rosily, therefrom a raw wind blew,
And ever with the growing day it grew
Until the stream rose choppily and drove
The fleet ashore. Camped snugly in a grove
Of cottonwoods, they slept. And when the gale,
Together with the light, began to fail,
They 'rose and ate and set a-drift again.

It seemed the solid world that mothers men
With twilight and the falling moon had passed,
And there was nothing but a hollow vast,
By time-outlasting stars remotely lit,
And they who at the central point of it
Hung motionless; while, rather sensed than seen,
The phantoms of a world that had been green
Stole by in silence — shapes that once were
trees,
Black wraiths of bushes, airy traceries

80 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Remembering the hills. Then sleep made swift
The swinging of the Dipper and the lift
Of stars that dwell upon the day's frontier;
Until at length the wheeling hollow sphere
Began to fill. And just at morningshine
They landed at the Little Porcupine.

Again they slept and, putting off at night,
They passed the Elk Horn Prairie on the right
Halfway to dawn and Wolf Creek. One night
more

Had vanished when they slept upon the shore
Beside the Poplar's mouth. And three had
fled

When, black against the early morning red,
The Fort that Henry builded heard their calls,
And sentries' rifles spurting from the walls
Spilled drawling echoes. Then the gates swung
wide

And shouting trappers thronged the riverside
To welcome back the homing *voyageurs*.

That day was spent in sorting out the furs,
With eager talk of how the winter went;
And with the growing night grew merriment.
The hump and haunches of a bison cow
Hung roasting at the heaped-up embers now

On Henry's hearth. The backlog whined and
popped

And, sitting squat or lounging elbow-propped,
Shrewd traders in the merchandise of tales
Held traffic, grandly careless how the scales
Tiptilted with a slight excessive weight.
And when the roast was finished, how they ate!
And there was that which set them singing too
Against the deep bass music of the flue,
While catgut screamed ecstatic in the lead,
Encouraging the voices used and keyed
To vast and windy spaces.

Later came

A gentler mood when, staring at the flame,
Men ventured reminiscences and spoke
About Kentucky people or the folk
Back yonder in Virginia or the ways
They knew in old St. Louis; till the blaze
Fell blue upon the hearth, and in the gloom
And melancholy stillness of the room
They heard the wind of midnight wail outside.
Then there was one who poked the logs and cried:
"Is this a weeping drunk? I swear I'm like
To tear my hair! Sing something lively, Mike!"
And Fink said nought; but after poring long
Upon the logs, began an Irish song —

82 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

A gently grieving thing like April rain,
That while it wakes old memories of pain,
Wakes also odors of the violet.
A broken heart, it seemed, could ne'er forget
The eyes of Nora, dead upon the hill.
And when he ceased the men sat very still,
As hearing yet the low caressing note
Of some lost angel mourning in his throat.
And afterwhile Mike spoke: "Shure, now," said
he,

"'Tis in a woman's eyes shtrong liquors be;
And if ye drink av thim — and if ye drink —"
For just a moment in the face of Fink
Talbeau beheld that angel yearning through;
And wondering if Carpenter saw too,
He looked, and lo! the guileless fellow — grinned!

As dreaming water, stricken by a wind,
Gives up the imaged heaven that it knows,
So Fink's face lost the angel. He arose
And left the place without a word to say.

The morrow was a perfect April day;
Nor might one guess — so friendly was the sun,
So kind the air — what thread at length was
spun,

What shears were opened now to sever it.
No sullen mood was Mike's. His biting wit

Made gay the trappers busy with the fur;
Though more and ever more on Carpenter
His sallies fell, with ever keener whet.
And Carpenter, unskilled in banter, met
The sharper sally with the broader grin.
But, by and by, Mike made a jest, wherein
Some wanton innuendo lurked and leered,
About the Long Knife's girl. The place went
weird

With sudden silence as the tall man strode
Across the room, nor lacked an open road
Among the men. A glitter in his stare
Belied the smile he bore; and, pausing there
With stiffened index finger raised and held
Before the jester's eyes, as though he spelled
The slow words out, he said: "We'll have no
jokes

In just that way about our women folks!"
And Fink guffawed.

They would have fought again,
Had not the Major stepped between the men
And talked the crisis by. And when 'twas past,
Talbeau, intent to end the strife at last,
Somehow persuaded Fink to make amends,
And, as a proof that henceforth they were
friends,

84 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Proposed the shooting of the whisky cup.
"Shure, b'y," said Mike, "we'll toss a copper up
And if 'tis heads I'll thry me cunning first.
As fer me joke, the tongue of me is cursed
Wid double j'int — so let it be forgot!"
And so it was agreed.

They cleared a spot
And flipped a coin that tinkled as it fell.
A tiny sound — yet, like a midnight bell
That sets wild faces pressing at the pane,
Talbeau would often hear that coin again,
In vivid dreams, to waken terrified.
'Twas heads.

And now the tall man stepped aside
And, beckoning Talbeau, he whispered: "Son,
If anything should happen, keep my gun
For old time's sake. And when the Major
pays
In old St. Louis, drink to better days
When friends were friends, with what he's owing
me."
Whereat the little man laughed merrily
And said: "Old Horse, you're off your feed
to-day;
But if you've sworn an oath to blow your pay,

I guess the three of us can make it good !
Mike couldn't miss a target if he would."
"Well, maybe so," said Carpenter, and smiled.

A windless noon was brooding on the wild
And in the clearing, eager for the show,
The waiting trappers chatted. Now Talbeau
Stepped off the range. The tall man took his
place,
The grin of some droll humor on his face ;
And when his friend was reaching for his head
To set the brimming cup thereon, he said :
"You won't forget I gave my gun to you
And all my blankets and my fixin's too ?"
The small man laughed and, turning round, he
cried :
"We're ready, Mike !"

A murmur ran and died
Along the double line of eager men.
Fink raised his gun, but set it down again
And blew a breath and said : "I'm gittin' dhry !
So howld yer noddle shtiddy, Bill, me b'y,
And don't ye shpill me whisky !" Cedar-straight
The tall man stood, the calm of brooding Fate
About him. Aye, and often to the end
Talbeau would see that vision of his friend —

86 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

A man-flower springing from the fresh green sod,
While, round about, the bushes burned with God
And mating peewees fluted in the brush.

They heard a gun lock clicking in the hush.
They saw Fink sighting — heard the rifle crack,
And saw beneath the spreading powder rack
The tall man pitching forward.

Echoes fled
Like voices in a panic. Then Mike said :
“Bejasus, and ye’ve shpilled me whisky, Bill!”
A catbird screamed. The crowd stood very still
As though bewitched.

“And can’t ye hear?” bawled Fink ;
“I say, I’m dhry — and now ye’ve shpilled me
drink!”
He stooped to blow the gasses from his gun.

And now men saw Talbeau. They saw him run
And stoop to peer upon the prostrate man
Where now the mingling blood and whisky ran
From oozing forehead and the tilted cup.
And in the hush a sobbing cry grew up :
“My God ! You’ve killed him, Mike !”

Then growing loud,
A wind of horror blew among the crowd
And set it swirling round about the dead.
And over all there roared a voice that said :
“I niver mint to do it, b’ys, I swear !
The divil’s in me gun !” Men turned to stare
Wild-eyed upon the center of that sound,
And saw Fink dash his rifle to the ground,
As ’twere the hated body of his wrong.

Once more arose that wailing, like a song,
Of one who called and called upon his friend.

VII

THE THIRD RIDER

It seemed the end, and yet 'twas not the end.
A day that wind of horror and surprise
Blew high; and then, as when the tempest dies
And only aspens prattle, as they will,
Though pines win silence and the oaks are still,
By furtive twos and threes the talk survived.
To some it seemed that men were longer lived
Who quarreled not over women. Others guessed
That love was bad for marksmanship at best —
The nerves, you know! Still others pointed
out

Why Mike should have the benefit of doubt;
For every man, who knew a rifle, knew
That there were days you'd split a reed in two,
Off-hand at fifty paces; then, one day,
Why, somehow, damn your eyes, you'd blaze
away

And miss a bull! No doubt regarding that!
“But,” one replied, “'tis what you're aiming at,
Not what you hit, determines skill, you know!”—
An abstract observation, apropos

Of nothing in particular, but made
As just a contribution to the trade
Of gunnery! And others would recall
The center of that silence in the hall
The night one lay there waiting, splendid, still,
And nothing left to wait for. Poor old Bill!
There went a man, by God! Who knew his
like —
So meek in might? And some remembered
Mike —
The hearth-lit room — the way he came to look
Upon that face — and how his shoulders shook
With sobbing as he moaned: "My friend! My
friend!"

It seemed the end, and yet 'twas not the end,
Though men cared less to know what cunning
gnome
Or eyeless thing of doom had ridden home
The deadly slug. And then there came a day
When Major Henry had a word to say
That seemed, at last, to lay the ghost to rest.
He meant to seek the River of the West
Beyond the range, immensely rich in furs,
And for the wiving prowls of *voyageurs*
A virgin yearning. Yonder one might glide
A thousand miles to sunset, where the tide

90 THE SONG OF THREE FRIENDS

Is tempered with an endless dream of May!
So much and more the Major had to say —
Words big with magic for the young men's
ears.

And finally he called for volunteers —
Two men to hasten to the Moreau's mouth,
Meet Ashley's party coming from the south
And bid them buy more horses at the Grand
Among the Rees. Then, pushing through the
band,
Mike Fink stood forth, and after him, Talbeau.

Now Henry thought 'twere wiser they should
go

By land, although the river trail, he knew,
Were better. But a wind of rumor blew
Up stream. About the region of the Knife,
It seemed, the Grovans tarried, nursing strife
Because the Whites were favoring their foes
With trade for guns; and, looking on their
bows,

The Grovans hated. So the rumor said.
And thus it came to pass the new trail led
About six days by pony to the south;
Thence eastward, five should find the Moreau's
mouth

And Ashley toiling up among the bars.

The still white wind was blowing out the stars
When yawning trappers saw the two men row
Across the river with their mounts in tow —
A red roan stallion and a buckskin mare.
And now the ponies gain the far bank there
And flounder up and shake themselves like dogs.
And now the riders mount and breast the
fogs

Flung down as wool upon the flat. They dip
And rise and float, submerging to the hip,
Turn slowly into shadow men, and fade.
And some have said that when the ponies neighed,
'Twas like a strangled shriek; and far ahead
Some ghostly pony, ridden by the dead,
Called onward like a bugle singing doom.
And when the valley floor, as with a broom,
Was swept by dawn, men saw the empty land.

Not now the Song shall tell of Henry's band
Ascending to the Falls, nor how they crossed
The Blackfoot trail, nor how they fought and
lost,
Thrown back upon the Yellowstone to wait
In vain for Ashley's hundred. Yonder, Fate
Led southward through the fog, and thither
goes
The prescient Song.

The April sun arose
And fell; and all day long the riders faced
A rolling, treeless, melancholy waste
Of yellow grass; for 'twas a rainless time,
Nor had the baby green begun to climb
The steep-kneed hills, but kept the nursing
draws.

And knee to knee they rode with scarce a pause,
Save when the ponies drank; and scarce a word,
As though the haunting silence of a third,
Who rode between them, shackled either tongue.
And when along the sloughs the twilight flung
Blue haze, and made the hills seem doubly bleak,
They camped beside a songless little creek
That crawled among the clumps of stunted plum
Just coming into bud. And both sat dumb
Beside a mewling fire, until the west
Was darkened and the shadows leaped and pressed
About their little ring of feeble light.
Then, moved by some vague menace in the
night,

Fink forced a laugh that wasn't glad at all,
And joked about a certain saddle gall
That troubled him — a Rabelaisian quip
That in the good old days had served to strip
The drooping humor from the dourest jowl.
He heard the laughter of the prairie owl,

A goblin jeering. Gazing at the flame,
Talbeau seemed not to hear. But when there
came

A cry of kiotes, peering all about
He said: "You don't suppose they'll dig him
out?"

I carried heavy stones till break of day.
You don't suppose they'll come and paw away
The heavy stones I packed, and pester Bill?"
"Huh uh," Fink grunted; but the evening chill
Seemed doubled on a sudden; so he sought
His blanket, wrapped it closely, thought and
thought
Till drowsy nonsense tumbled through his skull.

Now at that time of night when comes a lull
On stormy life; when even sorrow sleeps,
And sentinels upon the stellar steep
Sight morning, though the world is blind and
dumb,

Fink wakened at a whisper: "Mike! He's come!
Look! Look!" And Mike sat up and blinked
and saw.

It didn't walk — it burned along the draw —
Tall, radiantly white! It wasn't dead —
It smiled — it had a tin cup on its head —
Eh? — Gone!

Fink stirred the embers to a flare.
What dream was this? The world seemed
unaware

That anything at all had come to pass.
Contentedly the ponies nipped the grass
There in the darkness; and the night was still.
They slept no more, but nursed the fire until
The morning broke; then ate and rode away.

They weren't any merrier that day.
And each spoke little, save when Fink would swear
And smirch the virtue of the buckskin mare
For picking quarrels with the roan he rode.
(Did not the Northwind nag her like a goad,
And was there any other horse to blame?)

The worried day dragged on and twilight came —
A dusty gray. They climbed a hill to seek
Some purple fringe of brush that marked a creek.
The prairie seemed an endless yellow blur:
Nor might they choose but tarry where they were
And pass the cheerless night as best they could,
For they had seen no water-hole or wood
Since when the sun was halfway down the sky;
And there would be no stars to travel by,
So thick a veil of dust the great wind wove.
They staked their ponies in a leeward cove,
And, rolling in their blankets, swooned away.

Talbeau awoke and stared. 'Twas breaking
day!

So soon? It seemed he scarce had slept a wink!
He'd have another snooze, for surely Fink
Seemed far from waking, sprawled upon the
ground,

His loose mouth gaping skyward with a sound
As of a bucksaw grumbling through a knot.

Talbeau dropped back and dreamed the sun was
hot

Upon his face. He tried but failed to stir;
Whereat he knew that he was Carpenter
And hot-breathd wolves were sniffing round his
head!

He wasn't dead! He really wasn't dead!
Would no one come, would no one drive them off?
His cry for help was nothing but a cough,
For something choked him. Then a shrill long
scream

Cut knife-like through the shackles of his dream,
And once again he saw the lurid flare
Of morning on the hills.

What ailed the mare?

She strained her tether, neighing. And the
roan?

He squatted, trembling, with his head upthrown,

And lashed his tail and snorted at the blast.
 Perhaps some prowling grizzly wandered past.
 Talbeau sat up. What stifling air! How warm!
 What sound was that? Perhaps a thunder
 storm

Was working up. He coughed; and then it
 broke

Upon him how the air was sharp with smoke;
 And, leaping up, he turned and looked and knew
 What birdless dawn, unhallowed by the dew,
 Came raging from the northwest! Half the
 earth

And half the heavens were a burning hearth
 Fed fat with grass inflammable as tow!
 He shook Fink, yelling: "Mike, we've got to go!
 All hell's broke loose!"

 They cinched the saddles on
 With hands that fumbled; mounted and were
 gone,

Like rabbits fleeing from a kiote pack.
 They crossed the valley, topped a rise, looked
 back,

Nor dared to gaze. The firm, familiar world,
 It seemed, was melting down, and Chaos swirled
 Once more across the transient realms of form
 To scatter in the primal atom-storm

The earth's rich dust and potency of dreams.
Infernal geysers gushed, and sudden streams
Of rainbow flux went roaring up the skies
Through ghastly travesties of Paradise,
Where, drowsy in a tropic summertide,
Strange gaudy flowers bloomed and aged and
died —

Whole seasons in a moment. Bloody rain,
Blown slant like April silver, spewed the plain
To mock the fallow sod; and where it fell
Anemones and violets of hell
Foreran the fatal summer.

Spurs bit deep.

Now down the hill where shadow-haunted sleep
Fell from the broken wind's narcotic breath,
The ponies plunged. A sheltered draw, where
death
Seemed brooding in the silence, heard them
pass.

A hollow, deep with tangled jointed grass,
Snatched at the frantic hoofs. Now up a slope
They clambered, blowing, at a stumbling lope
And, reined upon the summit, wheeled to stare.
The stallion snorted, and the rearing mare
Screamed at the sight and bolted down the wind.
The writhing Terror, scarce a mile behind,

Appeared to gain; while far to left and right
 Its flanks seemed bending in upon the night —
 A ten-league python closing on its prey.

No guiding hand was needed for the way;
 Blind speed was all. So little Nature heeds
 The fate of men, these blew as tumbleweeds
 Before that dwarfing, elemental rage.
 A gray wolf bounded from a clump of sage;
 A rabbit left its bunchgrass nest and ran
 Beside its foe; and neither dreaded Man,
 The deadliest of all earth's preying things.
 A passing knoll exploded into wings,
 And prairie owls, befuddled by the light,
 Went tumbling up like patches of the night
 The burning tempest tattered.

Leaning low,

The gasping riders let the ponies go,
 The little buckskin leading, while the roan
 Strove hard a-flank, afraid to be alone
 And nickering at whiles. And he who led,
 By brief hypnotic lapses comforted,
 Recalled the broad Ohio, heard the horns
 The way they used to sing those summer morns
 When he and Mike and —. There the dream
 went wrong
 And through his head went running, like a song

That sings itself: 'He tried so hard to come
And warn us; but the grave had made him dumb,
And 'twas to show he loved us that he smiled.'
And of the other terror made a child
Whom often, for a panic moment's span,
Projections from the conscience of the man
Pursued with glaring eyes and claws of flame.
For this the dead arose, for this he came —
That grin upon his face!

A blinding gloom
Crushed down; then, followed by a rolling
boom,
There broke a scarlet hurricane of light
That swept the farthest reaches of the night
Where unsuspected hills leaped up aghast.
Already through the hollow they had passed
So recently, the hounding Terror sped!
And now the wind grew hotter. Overhead
Inverted seas of color rolled and broke,
And from the combers of the litten smoke
A stinging spindrift showered.

On they went,
Unconscious of duration or extent,
Of everything but that from which they fled.
Now, sloping to an ancient river bed,

The prairie flattened. Plunging downward there,
The riders suddenly became aware
How surged, beneath, a mighty shadow-stream —
As though the dying Prairie dreamed a dream
Of yesteraige when all her valleys flowed
With Amazons, and monster life abode
Upon her breast and quickened in her womb.
And from that rushing in the flame-smeared
gloom

Unnumbered outcries blended in a roar.
The headlong ponies struck the sounding shore
And reared upon their haunches. Far and near,
The valley was a-flood with elk and deer.
And buffalo and wolves and antelope
And whatsoever creature slough and slope
Along the path of terror had to give.
Torrential with the common will to live,
The river of unnumbered egos swept
The ponies with it. But the buckskin kept
The margin where the rabble frayed and thinned
And, breathing with the wheeze of broken wind,
The stallion clung to her.

It came to pass

The valley yawned upon a sea of grass
That seemed to heave, as waves of gloom and glare
Ran over it; and, rising here and there,

Tall buttes made islands in the living tide
That roared about them. Still with swinging
stride

And rhythmic breath the little buckskin ran
Among the herd, that opened like a fan
And scattered. But the roan was losing ground.
His breathing gave a gurgling, hollow sound,
As though his life were gushing from his throat.
His whole frame quivered like a scuttled boat
That slowly sinks; nor did he seem to feel
Upon his flank the biting of the steel
That made him bleed. Fink cut the rifle-boot
And saddle-bags away, to give the brute
Less burden.

Now it happened, as they neared
A lofty butte whose summit glimmered weird
Beneath the lurid boiling of the sky,
Talbeau was startled by a frantic cry
Behind him; noted that he rode alone,
And, turning in the saddle, saw the roan
Go stumbling down and wither to a heap.
And momentarily, between a leap and leap,
The love of self was mighty in the man;
For now the Terror left the hills and ran
With giant strides along the grassy plains.
Dear Yesterdays fought wildly for the reins,

To-morrows for the spur. And then the mare
 Heeled to the sawing bit and pawed the air
 And halted, prancing.

Once again Talbeau
 Looked back to where the sparks were blown as
 snow

Before that blizzard blast of scorching light,
 And saw Fink running down the painted night
 Like some lost spirit fleeing from the Wrath.

One horse — and who should ride it? All he
 hath

A man will give for life! But shall he give
 For living that which makes it good to live —
 The consciousness of fellowship and trust?
 Let fools so prize a pinch of throbbing dust!
 Now Fink should ride, and let the rest be hid.
 He bounded from the mare; but, as he did,
 The panic-stricken pony wheeled about,
 Won freedom with a lunge, and joined the
 rout
 Of fleeing shadows.

Well, 'twas over now —
 Perhaps it didn't matter anyhow —
 They'd go together now and hunt for Bill!
 And momentarily the world seemed very still

About Talbeau. Then Fink was at his side,
Blank horror in his face. "Come on!" he cried;
"The butte! We'll climb the butte!" And
once again
Talbeau knew fear.

Now, gripping hands, the men
Scuttled and dodged athwart the scattered flight
Of shapes that drifted in the flood of light,
A living flotsam; reached the bare butte's base,
Went scrambling up its leaning leeward face
To where the slope grew sheer, and huddled there.
And hotter, hotter, hotter grew the air,
Until their temples sang a fever tune.
The April night became an August noon.
Then, near to swooning in a blast of heat,
They heard the burning breakers boom and beat
About their lofty island, as they lay,
Their gaping mouths pressed hard against the
clay,
And fought for every breath. Nor could they tell
How long upon a blistered scarp in hell
They gasped and clung. But suddenly at last —
An age in passing, and a moment, passed —
The torture ended, and the cool air came;
And, looking out, they saw the long slant flame
Devour the night to leeward.

By and by
 Drab light came seeping through the sullen sky.
 They waited there until the morning broke,
 And, like a misty moon amid the smoke,
 The sun came stealing up.

They found a place
 Where rain had scarred the butte wall's western
 face
 With many runnels; clambered upward there —
 And viewed a panorama of despair.
 The wind had died, and not a sound arose
 Above those blackened leagues; for even crows
 (The solitude embodied in a bird)
 Had fled that desolation. Nothing stirred,
 Save here and there a thin gray column grew
 From where some draw still smouldered. And
 they knew
 How universal quiet may appal
 As violence, and, even as a wall,
 Sheer vacancy confine.

No horse, no gun!
 Nay, worse; no hint of water hole or run
 In all the flat or back among the hills!
 Mere hunger is a goad that, ere it kills,
 May drive the lean far down the hardest road:
 But thirst is both a snaffle and a load;

It gripped them now. When Mike made bold to
speak,

His tongue was like a stranger to his cheek.

"Shure, b'y," he croaked; "'tis Sunday morn in
hell!"

The sound seemed profanation; on it fell

The vast, rebuking silence.

Long they gazed

About them, standing silent and amazed

Upon the summit. West and north and east

They saw too far. But mystery, at least,

Was in the south, where still the smoke con-
cealed

The landscape. Vistas of the unrevealed

Invited Hope to stray there as it please.

And presently there came a little breeze

Out of the dawn. As of a crowd that waits

Some imminent revealment of the Fates

That toil behind the scenes, a murmur 'woke

Amid the hollow hush. And now the smoke

Mysteriously stirs, begins to flow,

And giant shadow bulks that loom below

Seem crowding downward. One by one they lift

Above the reek, and trail the ragged drift

About their flanks. A melancholy scene!

Gray buttes and giddy gulfs that yawn between —

A Titan's labyrinth! But see afar
 Where yonder canyon like a purple scar
 Cuts zigzag through the waste! Is that a gleam
 Of water in its deeps?

A stream! A stream!

Now scrambling down the runnels of the rain,
 They struck across the devastated plain
 Where losers of the night's mad race were strewn
 To wait the wolves and crows.

Mid-afternoon

Beheld them stripping at the river's bank.
 They wallowed in the turbid stream and drank
 Delicious beakers in the liquid mud;
 Nor drank alone, for here the burning flood
 Had flung its panting driftage in the dark.
 The valley teemed with life, as though some Ark
 That rode the deluge, spewed its cargo here:
 Elk, antelope, wolves, bison, rabbits, deer,
 Owls, crows — the greatest mingled with the least.
 And when the men had drunk, they had a feast
 Of liver, bolted dripping from a cow
 Dead at the water's lip.

Blue shadow now
 Was mounting slowly up the canyon steep;
 So, seeking for a better place to sleep,

They wandered down the margin of the stream.
'Twas scarce more real than walking in a dream
Of lonely craters in a lunar land
That never thrilled with roots. On either hand
The dwarfing summits soared, grotesque, austere,
And jagged fissures, sentinelled with fear,
Led back to mysteries of purple gloom.

They came to where a coulee, like a flume,
Rose steeply to the prairie. Thither hurled,
A roaring freshet of the herd had swirled,
Cascading to the river bed; and there,
Among the trampelled carcasses, the mare
Lay bloated near the water. She had run
With saddle, panniers, powder-horn and gun
Against the wind-thewed fillies of the fire,
And won the heat, to perish at the wire —
A plucky little brute!

VIII

VENGEANCE

They made a camp
Well up above the crawling valley damp,
And where no prowling beast might chance to
come.

There was no fuel; but a flask of rum,
Thanks to the buckskin, dulled the evening chill.
And both grew mellow. Memories of Bill
And other nights possessed the little man;
And on and on his reminiscence ran,
As 'twere the babble of a brook of tears
Gone groping for the ocean of dead years
Too far away to reach. And by and by
The low voice sharpened to an anguished cry:
"O Mike! I said you couldn't miss the cup!"

Then something snapped in Fink and, leaping up,
He seized Talbeau and shook him as a rat
Is shaken by a dog. "Enough of that!"
He yelled; "And, 'faith, I'll sind ye afther Bill
Fer wan more wurrd! Ye fool! I mint to kill!
And, moind me now, ye'd better howld yer lip!"

Talbeau felt murder shudder in the grip
That choked and shook and flung him. Faint
and dazed,
He sprawled upon the ground. And anger blazed
Within him, like the leaping Northern Light
That gives no heat. He wished to rise and
fight,
But could not for the horror of it all.
Wild voices thronged the further canyon wall
As Fink raved on; and every word he said
Was like a mutilation of the dead
By some demonic mob.

And when at length
He heard Mike snoring yonder, still the strength
To rise and kill came not upon Talbeau.
So many moments of the Long Ago
Came pleading; and the gentle might thereof
United with the habit of old love
To weave a spell about the sleeping man.
Then drowsily the pondered facts began
To merge and group, as running colors will,
In new and vaguer patterns. Mike and Bill
Were bickering again. And someone said:
"Let's flip a copper; if it's tails, he's dead;
If heads, he's living. That's the way to tell!"
A spinning copper jangled like a bell.

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But even as he stooped to pick it up,
Behold! the coin became a whisky cup
Bored smoothly through the center! "Look at
this!"

He seemed to shout: "I knew Mike couldn't
miss!

Bill only played at dying for a joke!"

Then laughter filled his dream, and he awoke.
The dawn was like a stranger's cold regard
Across the lifeless land, grotesquely scarred
As by old sorrow; and the man's dull sense
Of woe, become objective and immense,
Seemed waiting there to crush him.

Fink still slept;
And even now, it seemed, his loose mouth kept
A shape for shameless words, as though a breath,
Deep drawn, might set it gloating o'er the death
Of one who loved its jesting and its song.
And while Talbeau sat pondering the wrong
So foully done, and all that had been killed,
And how the laughter of the world was stilled
And all its wine poured out, he seemed to hear
As though a spirit whispered in his ear:
You won't forget I gave my gun to you!
And instantly the deep conviction grew

That 'twas a plea for justice from the slain.
Ah, not without a hand upon the rein,
Nor with an empty saddle, had the mare
Outrun the flame that she might carry there
The means of vengeance !

Yet — if Mike were dead !
He shuddered, gazing where the gray sky bled
With morning, like a wound. He couldn't kill ;
Nor did it seem to be the way of Bill
To bid him do it. Yet the gun was sent.
For what ? — To make Mike suffer and repent ?
But how ?

Awhile his apathetic gaze
Explored yon thirst- and hunger-haunted maze,
As though he might surprise the answer there.
The answer came. That region of despair
Should be Mike's Purgatory ! More than Chance
Had fitted circumstance to circumstance
That this should be ! He knew it ! And the plan,
Thus suddenly conceived, possessed the man.
It seemed the might of Bill had been reborn
In him.

He took the gun and powder horn,
The water flasks and sun-dried bison meat
The panniers gave ; then climbing to a seat

Above the sleeper, shouted down to him :
 "Get up !" Along the further canyon rim
 A multitude of voices swelled the shout.
 Fink started up and yawned and looked about,
 Bewildered. Once again the clamor ran
 Along the canyon wall. The little man,
 Now squinting down the pointed rifle, saw
 The lifted face go pale, the stubborn jaw
 Droop nervelessly. A twinge of pity stirred
 Within him, and he marvelled as he heard
 His own voice saying what he wished unsaid :
 "It's Bill's own rifle pointing at your head ;
 Go east, and think of all the wrong you've
 done !"

Fink glanced across his shoulder where the sun
 Shone level on the melancholy land ;
 And, feigning that he didn't understand,
 Essayed a careless grin that went awry.
 "Bejasus, and we'll not go there, me b'y,"
 He said ; "for shure 'tis hell widout the lights !"
 That one-eyed stare along the rifle sights
 Was narrowed to a slit. A sickening shock
 Ran through him at the clucking of the lock.
 He clutched his forehead, stammering : "Tal-
 beau,
 I've been yer frind —."

“I’ll give you three to go,”
The other said, “or else you’ll follow Bill!
One — two —.”

Fink turned and scuttled down the hill;
And at the sight the watcher’s eyes grew dim,
For something old and dear had gone from him —
His pride in one who made a clown of Death.
Alas, how much the man would give for breath!
How easily Death made of him the clown!

Now scrambling for a grip, now rolling down,
Mike landed at the bottom of the steep,
And, plunging in the river belly deep,
Struck out in terror for the other shore.
At any moment might the rifle’s roar
Crash through that rearward silence, and the
lead

Come snarling like a hornet at his head —
He felt the spot! Then presently the flood
Began to cool the fever in his blood,
And furtive self-derision stung his pride.
He clambered dripping up the further side
And felt himself a fool! He wouldn’t go!
That little whiffet yonder was Talbeau!
And who was this that he, Mike Fink, had feared?
He’d go and see.

A spurt of smoke appeared
 Across the river, and a bullet struck —
Spat ping — beside him, spewing yellow muck
 Upon his face. Then every cliff and draw
 Rehearsed the sullen thunders of the law
 He dared to question. Stricken strangely weak,
 He clutched the clay and watched the powder reek
 Trail off with glories of the level sun.
 He saw Talbeau pour powder in his gun
 And ram the wad. A second shot might kill!
 That brooding like a woman over Bill
 Had set the fellow daft. *A crazy man!*
 The notion spurred him. Springing up, he ran
 To where a gully cleft the canyon rim
 And, with that one-eyed fury after him,
 Fled east.

The very buttes, grotesque and weird,
 Seemed startled at the sight of what he feared
 And powerless to shield him in his need.
 'Twas more than man he fled from; 'twas a deed,
 Become alive and subtle as the air,
 That turned upon the doer. Everywhere
 It gibbered in the echoes as he fled.
 A stream of pictures flitted through his head:
 The quiet body in the hearth-lit hall,
 The grinning ghost, the flight, the stallion's fall,

The flame girt isle, the spectral morning sun,
And then the finding of the dead man's gun
Beside the glooming river. Flowing by,
These fused and focused in the deadly eye
He felt behind him.

Suddenly the ground
Heaved up and smote him with a crashing
sound;
And in the vivid moment of his fall
He thought he heard the snarling rifle ball
And felt the one-eyed fury crunch its mark.
Expectant of the swooping of the dark,
He raised his eyes. — The sun was shining
still;
It peeped about the shoulder of a hill
And viewed him with a quizzifying stare.
He looked behind him. Nothing followed
there;
But Silence, big with dread-begotten sound,
Dismayed him; and the steeps that hemmed him
round
Seemed plotting with a more than human guile.
He rose and fled; but every little while
A sense of eyes behind him made him pause;
And always down the maze of empty draws
It seemed a sound of feet abruptly ceased.

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Now trotting, walking now, he labored east ;
And when at length the burning zenith beat
Upon him, and the summits swam with heat,
And on the winding gullies fell no shade,
He came to where converging gulches made
A steep-walled basin for the blinding glare.
Here, fanged and famished, crawled the prickly
pear ;

Malevolent with thirst, the soap weed thrust
Its barbed stilettos from the arid dust,
Defiant of the rain-withholding blue :
And in the midst a lonely scrub oak grew,
A crooked dwarf that, in the pictured bog
Of its own shadow, squatted like a frog.
Fink, panting, flung himself beneath its boughs.
A mighty magic in the noonday drowse
Allayed the driving fear. A waking dream
Fulfilled a growing wish. He saw the stream
Far off as from a space-commanding height.
And now a phantasy of rapid flight
Transported him above the sagging land,
And with a sudden swoop he seemed to stand
Once more upon the shimmering river's brink.
His eyes drank deep ; but when his mouth would
drink,

A giant hornet from the other shore —
The generating center of a roar
That shook the world — snarled by.

He started up,
And saw the basin filling as a cup
With purple twilight! Gazing all around
Where still the flitting ghost of some great sound
Troubled the crags a moment, then was mute,
He saw along the shoulder of a butte,
A good three hundred paces from the oak,
A slowly spreading streak of rifle smoke
And knew the deadly eye was lurking there.
He fled again.

About him everywhere
Amid the tangled draws now growing dim,
Weird witnesses took cognizance of him
And told abroad the winding way he ran.
He halted only when his breath began
To stab his throat. And lo, the staring eye
Was quenched with night! No further need he
fly
Till dawn. And yet —. He held his breath to
hear
If footsteps followed. Silence smote his ear,
The gruesome silence of the hearth-lit hall,
More dread than sound. Against the gully wall
He shrank and huddled with his eyes shut tight,
For fear a presence, latent in the night,
Should walk before him.

Then it seemed he ran
Through regions alien to the feet of Man,
A weary way despite the speed of sleep,
And came upon a river flowing deep
Between black crags that made the sky a well.
And eerily the feeble starlight fell
Upon the flood with water lilies strown.
But when he stooped, the stream began to moan,
And suddenly from every lily pad
A white face bloomed, unutterably sad
And bloody browed.

A swift, erasing flame
Across the dusky picture, morning came.
Mike lay a moment, blinking at the blue;
And then the fear of yesterday broke through
The clinging drowse. For lo, on every side
The paling summits watched him, Argus-eyed,
In hushed anticipation of a roar.
He fled.

All day, intent to see once more
The open plain before the night should fall,
He labored on. But many a soaring wall
Annulled some costly distance he had won;
And misdirected gullies, white with sun,
Seemed spitefully to baffle his desire.

The deeps went blue; on mimic dome and spire
The daylight faded to a starry awe.
Mike slept; and lo, they marched along the
draw —

Or rather burned — tall, radiantly white!
A hushed procession, tunnelling the night,
They came, with lips that smiled and brows that
bled,

And each one bore a tin cup on its head,
A brimming cup. But ever as they came
Before him, like a draught-struck candle flame
They shuddered and were snuffed. Bancroft Library

'Twas deep night yet
When Mike awoke and felt the terror sweat
Upon his face, the prickling of his hair.
Afraid to sleep, he paced the gully there
Until the taller buttes were growing gray.
He brooded much on flowing streams that day.
As with a weight, he stooped; his feet were slow;
He shuffled. Less and less he feared Talbeau
Behind him. More and more he feared the
night
Before him. Any hazard in the light,
Or aught that might befall 'twixt living men,
Were better than to be alone again
And meet that dream!

The deeps began to fill
 With purple haze. Bewildered, boding ill,
 A moaning wind awoke. 'Twould soon be dark.
 Mike pondered. Twice Talbeau had missed the
 mark.

Perhaps he hadn't really meant to hit.
 And surely now that flaring anger fit
 Had burned away. It wasn't like the man
 To hold a grudge. Mike halted, and began
 To grope for words regretful of the dead,
 Persuasive words about a heart that bled
 For Bill. 'Twas all a terrible mistake.
 "Plase now, a little dhrop fer owld toime's sake!"
 With troublesome insistence, that refrain
 Kept running through the muddle of his brain
 And disarranged the words he meant to speak.
 The trickle of a tear along his cheek
 Consoled him. Soon his suffering would end.
 Talbeau would see him weeping for his friend —
 Talbeau had water!

Now the heights burned red
 To westward. With a choking clutch of dread
 He noted how the dusk was gathering
 Along the draws — a trap about to spring.
 He cupped his hands about his mouth and cried:
 "Talbeau! Talbeau!" Despairing voices died

Among the summits, and the lost wind pined.
It made Talbeau seem infinitely kind —
The one thing human in a ghostly land.
Where was he? Just a touch of that warm hand
Would thwart the dark! Mike sat against a wall
And brooded.

By and by a skittering fall
Of pebbles at his back aroused the man.
He scrambled to his feet and turned to scan
The butte that sloped above him. Where the
glow
Still washed the middle height, he saw Talbeau
Serenely perched upon a ledge of clay!
And Mike forgot the words he meant to say,
The fitted words, regretful of his deed.
A forthright, stark sincerity of need
Rough hewed the husky, incoherent prayer
He shouted to that Lord of water there
Above the gloom. A little drop to drink
For old time's sake!

Talbeau regarded Fink
Awhile in silence; then his thin lips curled.
"You spilled the only drink in all the world!
Go on," he said, "and think of what you've
done!"
Beyond the pointed muzzle of his gun

He saw the big man wither to a squat
 And tremble, like a bison when the shot
 Just nips the vital circle. Then he saw
 A stooping figure hurry down the draw,
 Grow dim, and vanish in the failing light.

'Twas long before Talbeau could sleep that night.
 Some questioner, insistently perverse,
 Assailed him and compelled him to rehearse
 The justifying story of the friend
 Betrayed and slain. But when he reached the
 end,

Still unconvinced the questioner was there
 To taunt him with that pleading of despair —
 For old time's sake! Sleep brought him little
 rest;

For what the will denied, the heart confessed
 In mournful dreams. And when the first faint
 gray

Aroused him, and he started on his way,
 He knew the stubborn questioner had won.
 No brooding on the wrong that Mike had done
 Could still that cry: "Plase now, fer owld
 toime's sake,

A little dhrop!" It made his eyeballs ache
 With tears of pity that he couldn't shed.
 No other dawn, save that when Bill lay dead

And things began to stare about the hall,
Had found the world so empty. After all,
What man could know the way another trod?
And who was he, Talbeau, to play at God?
Let one who curbs the wind and brews the
rain

Essay the subtler portioning of pain
To souls that err! Talbeau would make amends!
Once more they'd drink together and be friends.
How often they had shared!

He struck a trot,
Eyes fixed upon the trail. The sun rose hot;
Noon poured a blinding glare along the draws;
And still the trail led on, without a pause
To show where Mike had rested. Thirst began
To be a burden on the little man;
His progress dwindled to a dragging pace.
But when he tipped the flask, that pleading
face

Arose before him, and a prayer denied
Came mourning back to thrust his need aside —
A little drop! How Mike must suffer now!
“I'm not so very thirsty, anyhow,”
He told himself. And almost any bend
Might bring him on a sudden to his friend.
He'd wait and share the water.

Every turn
 Betrayed a hope. The west began to burn;
 Flared red; went ashen; and the stars came out.
 Dreams, colored by an unacknowledged doubt;
 Perplexed the trail he followed in his sleep;
 And dreary hours before the tallest steep
 Saw dawn, Talbeau was waiting for the day.

Till noon he read a writing in the clay
 That bade him haste; for now from wall to wall
 The footmarks wandered, like the crabbéd scrawl
 An old man writes. They told a gloomy tale.
 And then the last dim inkling of a trail
 Was lost upon a patch of hardened ground!

The red west saw him, like a nervous hound
 That noses vainly for the vanished track,
 Still plunging into gullies, doubling back,
 And pausing now and then to hurl a yell
 Among the ululating steeps. Night fell.
 The starlit buttes still heard him panting by,
 And summits weird with midnight caught his cry
 To answer, mocking.

Morning brought despair;
 Nor did he get much comfort of his prayer:
 "God, let me find him! Show me where to go!"
 Some greater, unregenerate Talbeau

Was God that morning; for the lesser heard
His own bleak answer echoed word for word:
Go on, and think of all the wrong you've done!

His futile wish to hasten sped the sun.
That day, as he recalled it in the dark,
Was like the spinning of a burning arc.
He nodded, and the night was but a swoon;
And morning neighbored strangely with the noon;
And evening was the noon's penumbral haze.

No further ran the reckoning of days.
'Twas evening when at last he stooped to stare
Upon a puzzling trail. A wounded bear,
It seemed, had dragged its rump across the sands
That floored the gullies now. But sprawling
 hands
Had marked the margin! Why was that? No
 doubt
Mike too had tarried here to puzzle out
What sort of beast had passed. And yet — how
 queer —
'Twas plain no human feet had trodden here!
A trail of hands! That throbbing in his brain
Confused his feeble efforts to explain;
And hazily he wondered if he slept
And dreamed again. Tenaciously he kept

His eyes upon the trail and labored on,
Lest, swooping like a hawk, another dawn
Should snatch that hope away.

A sentry crow,

Upon a sunlit summit, saw Talbeau
And croaked alarm. The noise of many wings,
In startled flight, and raucous chatterings
Arose. What feast was interrupted there
A little way ahead? 'Twould be the bear!
He plodded on. The intervening space
Sagged under him; and, halting at the place
Where late the flock had been, he strove to break
A grip of horror. Surely now he'd wake
And see the morning quicken in the skies!

The thing remained! — It hadn't any eyes —
The pilfered sockets bore a pleading stare!

A long, hoarse wail of anguish and despair
Aroused the echoes. Answering, arose
Once more the jeering chorus of the crows.



